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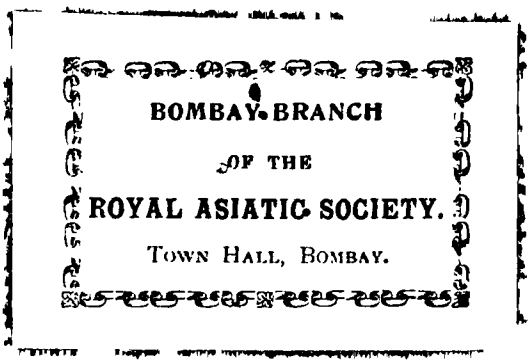

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THE STORY OF HELEN DAVENANT.

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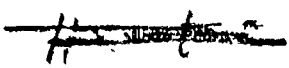
BY

VIOLET FANE,

AUTHOR OF "DENZIL PLACE," "SOPHY, OR THE ADVENTURES OF A SAVAGE," "THROUGH LOVE AND WAR," ETC., ETC.



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TO MY

DEAR AND DISTINGUISHED FRIEND,

ALEXANDER WILLIAM KINGLAKE

THIS BOOK IS GRATEFULLY AND AFFECTIONATELY

DEDICATED.

THE STORY OF

HELEN DAVENANT.

CHAPTER I.

I WAS little more than six years old when I was unexpectedly summoned to what proved to be my mother's death-bed. She had been indisposed for a few days only, remaining in her room for the greater part of the morning; but I do not think there could have been any suspicion in the house that her end was approaching. I have since heard that my father, Sir Harry Davenant, a sporting country gentleman of the old school, had started off early in the morning for the chase, having made arrangements for a reinforcement of hunters, so that he had evidently intended to be absent during the greater part of the day. Also, Mr. Collingwood, a neighbour and friend, had been invited to dine and sleep. Sir Harry was said to be devotedly attached to his wife, and he would certainly not have absented himself from her side if he had been aware that she was in any danger, nor would he have desired to receive even an intimate friend at dinner at so sad a time.

I had been playing alone in my nursery, after a somewhat pensive and desultory fashion, with none of those noisy rompings and scamperings which shake the floors and wear out the carpets of more populous nurseries. I was merely sitting quietly upon the hearth-rug, building

up little temples and pyramids with wooden bricks, and then knocking them down again, without feeling much interest in my occupation. Then Celestine Vigon, my mother's new French maid—who, I remember, was young, dark, and foreign-looking, and wore long gold earrings—appeared at the nursery door, and, after saying a few words in broken English to Mrs. Mason, my nurse, led me by the hand to my mother's bed-room, which was situated quite at the other end of the house.

I have heard, since, that my mother was one of the most beautiful women of her day, and I well remember how lovely she appeared, to my childish gaze, on this last occasion on which I beheld her.

She was sitting, propped up by pillows, in the large four-post bed, dressed only in some sort of white wrapper, with her dark hair drawn back from her face, and hanging in long tresses over her shoulders. She seemed to me to look wonderfully young and girlish for a mother, but she had grown much paler and thinner, I thought, since the morning, and her eyes had an anxious and unhappy expression.

"Look here, Little Nelly," she said, as soon as Celestine had left us. "You have always been a dear, obedient little girl. . . . . Pay attention to what I'm saying now, for I feel very faint, and can't talk much. Open the side door of that wardrobe there, and do exactly as I tell you."

I went to the wardrobe. It was unlocked, and the door opened quite easily. At first, I could see nothing inside it but beautiful evening dresses of many colours, some of which I had seen my mother wearing before she was so much confined to her room.

"Lift up the skirts of those dresses," she said, "and, behind them, you will see a large box."

I did as I was bid, and perceived a square black box quite at the back of the cupboard. I drew it forward and attempted to lift it.

"Oh, don't do that!" cried my mother from the bed; "it's much too heavy for you! . . . Come here and take this key."

I observed that, as she spoke, she was drawing off a long chain from her neck. A gold key was attached to it, and she handed me both key and chain together.

This act seemed to cost her a supreme effort. She sank back amongst her pillows as though exhausted.

"Push the key into the lock quite straight," she said, by-and-bye. "Press it inwards as far as you can, and then turn it."

What with the darkness of the cupboard, however, which was obscured by a large picture-screen standing to the left of the bed, and the long chain, which kept on catching in the laces and fringes of the dresses, I found it no very easy matter to do as I was bid.

"Make haste, dear!" exclaimed my mother anxiously, "before Celestine comes back with my soup! She might not like to see you meddling with my things!"

Child as I was, I perceived that she was intensely agitated, and became aware that my mission, whatever it was, must be one of importance.

At last I succeeded in unlocking the box, and lifting up the lid.

"The box has come open," I said, turning to my mother from where I sat on the floor.

She was looking dreadfully pale, and her voice sounded quite feeble as she answered:

"There are two packets just at the top—letters. One of them is tied round with black ribbon—from your poor uncle Everard, directed to me before I was married; and the other—ah, you can't read!"

She said this in a tone of disappointment—almost of despair.

It was too true! I hung my head in bitter humiliation. Reading, at this period of my life, seemed to be fraught

with insurmountable difficulties, and the mystery of written characters appeared to me to be even more inscrutable than that of printed type.

"You must throw one of those two packets into the fire," continued my mother earnestly, "before Celestine comes back, and see that it is quite burnt up, and then lock up the box and don't say anything about it to anybody. Bring me the letters that have got red seals on them here."

I found the two packets, compared them carefully, and observed that the letters in the thickest packet—that which was not tied round with black ribbon—were all of them sealed with red wax.

"There is a little horse with wings upon the seals," I said, when I had finished examining them.

"Quick! quick!" gasped my mother, "or it will be too late! Bring me them here, and let me look at them."

But the split-ring, upon the long gold chain, had become entangled in the black ribbon binding the smaller packet, and my hurry seemed only to make my childish fingers the more helpless and awkward. I daresay, however, that not more than two or three minutes elapsed, in reality, before I had achieved my purpose, and stood, with the packet of sealed letters in my hand, at the side of my mother's bed.

I remember that I was so small, at this time, that the bed seemed to rise up before me like a great snow mountain. My eyes could only just have come above the level of the counterpane.

I was an impressionable child, and my hands trembled with excitement. I felt that, for the first time in my short life, I had been entrusted with something important and mysterious, and I was swelling with consequential pride at the notion of having been unmistakeably useful to the being I loved and respected most upon earth.

But, just as I was expecting words of commendation

and approval, I was disappointed to find that my mother had, apparently, either fainted or fallen into a deep sleep.

Feeling somewhat uncertain with regard to her directions, and fearing lest Celestine might return before I had fulfilled them to the letter, I called softly to her. She did not reply.

I raised my voice, but still she remained silent.

I now fancied that I heard the peculiar squeaking sound made by the swing-door at the end of the passage. Celestine must be returning, I thought, with the soup; so, finding that it was impossible to awaken my mother, I hastily decided upon a plan of action.

Until now I had not felt sure which of the two packets was to be consigned to the flames. But, after summoning all my wits to my aid, I arrived at what I thought must be the right conclusion. My mother had requested that the letters with the pretty red seals should be brought to her in her bed. These then, without doubt, were those she desired to preserve, whilst the letters of my poor uncle Everard—her only brother, who had been killed in the Crimean War—were, for some mysterious reason, to be immediately destroyed.

There was not a moment to be lost, for I could hear what I conceived to be Celestine's footsteps approaching rapidly.

A bright fire was burning in the wide, old-fashioned grate. I dived into the cupboard for the second time, brought forth my uncle Everard's letters, and running to the fire-place cast them, bound together as they were, into "the burning fiery furnace."

After all, the approaching footsteps were not those of Celestine. They passed by the door and went on to the end of the passage. One of the other servants, probably. This gave me a little more time for reflection.

I had left the other packet of letters upon the outside of the bed. It now occurred to me that, by placing them

inside the coverlid, close to one of my mother's hands, she would find what she had asked for immediately upon awakening. I acted upon this impulse at once, and I had scarcely re-locked the black box, when I was again aware of the squeaking of the swing-door.

This time it was really Celestine with the soup, for I could hear the cup rattling against the saucer as she approached the door.

When she re-entered the room, the cupboard presented its usual appearance, and I had just had time to slip the gold chain, with the key, inside the bed-clothes, within easy reach of my mother's hand.

As Celestine opened the door I saw Mason, my nurse, standing just outside it, wearing her bonnet and shawl. She beckoned to me, and, knowing that it was past the hour for my accustomed afternoon walk, I went to her at once.

As soon as I had been warmly wrapped up in my new winter pelisse, we proceeded by way of the avenue towards one of the lodge gates.

Mason seemed, I thought, to be unusually preoccupied, and beyond a few conventional phrases, such as nurses are in the habit of addressing to their youthful charges, she spoke but little.

I, too, after a childish fashion, was preoccupied. I was thinking of the mysterious service I had just been called upon to render my mother, and wondering why she should have been so anxious to destroy my uncle Everard's letters before the return of Celestine.

Since that time, many musings and conjectures have possessed me when thinking over the events of this day; and I have found myself wondering whether there would have been any very marked difference in the ordering of my destiny if, instead of burning the letters that were bound round with black ribbon, I had been mercifully inspired to do away with those that were sealed with the

red seals. Upon such problems, however, it is vain to speculate.

My mother's death occurred towards the middle of the month of December. The day was fine and somewhat frosty. There had been sunshine in the morning, but by the time that Mason and I set out for our afternoon walk, the best of the day was over. Upon arriving at the lodge, therefore, my nurse decided that we should go no further.

As we turned to retrace our steps I saw Tom Pearse, one of Sir Harry's grooms, riding towards us at full speed. The home of my childhood was situated amongst the beechwoods of a line of down, extending for some miles along the sea-coast, and the roadway of the avenue, as well as the garden-walks, was strewn with sifted sea-shingle instead of the ordinary inland gravel. A horse passing over this quickly produced a kind of crisp, metallic, crunching sound, which I can always summon at will to my mind's ear. More especially can I recall the impression caused by the sound of it upon this particular day—together with the sudden manner in which Tom reined in his horse with a heightening of the shoulders, and one or two uncomfortable bumpings upon the saddle, when he came to the lodge and shouted out "Gate!"

This Tom Pearse was rather a favourite of mine. He had charge of my new pony, and it was his custom to conduct me to its loose-box whenever I went to the stables to pat and feed my little pet.

I ran back to the gate now, perceiving that he seemed in so great a hurry, and pushed it open for him, assisted by my nurse. Before proceeding upon his way, he called her to him, and leaning down, muttered something in a low voice. I could only catch the word "doctor" from where I was standing. He put spurs to his horse as soon as he got outside upon the high road, and was quickly out of sight.

Mason appeared to be a good deal perturbed by what

he had told her. She said nothing about it to me, however, and we continued our homeward way in silence.

Upon entering the house, my nurse proceeded at once upstairs, instead of lingering with me, as she usually did, before a large cage of goldfinches and canaries which stood in the hall close to the entrance of my mother's sitting-room.

I was an only child and a spoilt one, and was allowed at this time to do very much as I liked; so, having provided myself with plantain and chickweed during my walk, I remained in the hall feeding the birds instead of following my nurse upstairs.

Matthews, the old butler, looking glum and pompous as usual, came twice into the hall whilst I was standing by the birdcage. He went to the front-door, looked out, and appeared to listen. Probably this was about the hour at which he expected my father to return.

Whilst I was feeding the birds, I thought a great deal about my mother, but I did not feel the slightest anxiety as to her condition. I imagined, in those early days, that all deaths were of necessity violent. The stories Mason used to read to me—"Who Killed Cock Robin?" "Toodle-cum-too and the Hungry Tom-cat," "Jack the Giant-Killer," "Blue-Beard," and others of the same sort, served to confirm me in this opinion. I fancied that people died because they were shot with arrows, devoured by wild beasts, or had their heads cut off. Of the tranquil and unexpected passing away of the spirit, the falling into the eternal slumber whilst lying comfortably in a soft white bed, I had had, as yet, no experience whatsoever, and I regarded an illness as merely one of the necessary preliminaries to getting well.

Before I had left my place at the birdcage, I again detected the peculiar sound caused by the approach of horses' hoofs upon the shingle. I ran to the door, and perceived my father returning by precisely the opposite

direction to that which Tom Pearse had taken about half-an-hour ago. He was accompanied by a friend, called George Collingwood—the eldest surviving son of our neighbour, Lord Silchester—the friend who had been invited to dine and sleep.

They both wore red coats, and as they emerged together from under the dark evergreens, which formed an arch-way over the road, I was struck, young as I was, by the picturesqueness of their appearance. I was under the impression, at this period, that Mr. Collingwood was my parents' dearest and truest friend, because, ever since I could remember anything at all, he had visited us from time to time, and had always been welcomed with cordiality.

Besides this he was my godfather—and I had been christened "Helen Collingwood." I regarded him, in fact, like a member of our own family, and his visits—laden as he invariably was, with the most delightful presents for me—were always occasions for rejoicing. He was engaged in diplomacy, and attached, at this time, to one of our Embassies abroad. This did not prevent him, however, from frequently visiting his native land. His father was an old man, and he was a dutiful and attentive son. Several times during the year, and almost invariably at Christmas, he used to return to the home of his boyhood; and upon these occasions I think that we saw almost as much of him as Lord Silchester himself. He came frequently to luncheon and dinner. Sometimes he would remain all night, and he always passed some part of the time playing with me in the nursery.

I went to the front door now—opened it, and ran out to welcome the returning hunters. Sir Harry, when he came back from riding, used sometimes to set me up in front of him on his horse, and take me a few turns up and down, before dismounting. It was for this treat that I was hoping now. My father was talking and laughing with

Mr. Collingwood, and gesticulating with his hunting-crop.

"Well, little woman!" he called out to me, in cheery tones, "how's 'mama'?"

But, before I had time to reply, I saw Matthews, of whom I stood in great awe, coming towards us from the house.

He went up to my father, and said something. My father uttered an exclamation, and let the reins drop upon his horse's neck. Matthews then made what was evidently the same communication to Mr. Collingwood, with very much the same result. The horses seemed to pull up of their own accord at the front door, and Matthews assisted my father to dismount. Mr. Collingwood dismounted likewise, and gave the reins to the coachman, who was in waiting.

My father held out his hand towards him with a gesture like that of a despairing man who craves for a friend's sympathy. Mr. Collingwood wrung it in silence. Both he and Sir Harry were looking as pale as death, and they went up the steps together, hand in hand, staggering like drunken men.

I know now—for I have mingled with my own childish reminiscences much that is the result of after-knowledge—that although my mother had, by this time, breathed her last, Matthews had not ventured to tell my father that she was really dead, dreading the effect which might have been produced upon him by the suddenness of the news, and preferring to leave this responsibility to the doctor, who was momentarily expected. He had, however, informed Sir Harry and Mr. Collingwood that she had become rapidly worse during the afternoon—that she appeared to be gradually sinking, and was now unconscious. Notwithstanding this caution on the butler's part the effect produced upon my father by the intelligence he had just received was distressing in the extreme.

Matthews and Mr. Collingwood—who seemed also terribly affected — had to almost carry him upstairs. He walked as if his limbs had suddenly been turned into lead.

I followed close behind them, frightened and wondering, and saw them all three go down the passage to the door of my mother's bed-room.

Matthews opened the door a little way, and seemed to be gently thrusting my father into the apartment. He appeared to shrink, however, from going into the room alone. Twice I saw him reel backwards from the door. Then, as if summoning all his courage, he clutched Mr. Collingwood by the shoulder, as though for support, and the two went together into the chamber of death.

Matthews came down the passage soon afterwards. I looked at him appealingly, hoping that he would tell me what had happened. He took no notice of me, however, but marched solemnly on. His face looked vacant and inscrutable, and I felt too awed and frightened to question him.

As soon as he was out of sight I went down the passage, and hovered outside my mother's room, longing, and yet not daring, to enter.

In a few minutes the door opened.

"Leave me alone with her, George," I could hear my father saying, in a broken voice — "I feel that I can bear it now," and Mr. Collingwood came out into the passage.

He seemed to be breathing very hard, but it was nearly dark now, so that I could not see the expression of his face.

He perceived me when he came to where I was standing —caught me up in his arms, and kissed me passionately. When he set me down again, I felt that my cheeks were quite wet, as if with tears.

CHAPTER II.

My mother, I have heard, had been united to Sir Harry Davenant when she was barely twenty, he being her senior by precisely this number of years. She apparently married him chiefly on account of his importunity. He had proposed to her several times and had been refused; but it seems that his ardour would brook no denial. The marriage, however, was said to have been a happy one. At the time of my mother's death they had been married about ten years, my birth having taken place some three years after their union.

In common with most of the owners of entailed property, Sir Harry had hoped for a son to inherit his name and estates. Up to this time, however, there seemed to be no reason why this hope should not be gratified, and, in the meanwhile, I do not think he could have petted and indulged me more than he did, even if I had been a boy.

Failing a son, the house and estate of Northover Park were settled upon my first cousin, Courtenay Davenant, at this time a schoolboy in his teens. I had a dim recollection of a boy who came to us once, a long time ago, to spend his holidays, but could remember no more about him than that he had arrived upon a wet day, wearing a short jacket, no overcoat, a high hat and black kid gloves, and that having had, I suppose, reason to rub his nose, the damp gloves had made a black mark upon it, of which he was totally unaware, and so bore himself with great dignity notwithstanding. He must have been in mourning for his father at this time, and hence, probably, the black kid gloves. I have no doubt that he may have visited Northover both before and after this, but I could only recall this one occasion amongst the very earliest of my recollections.

It was only natural that so sudden a calamity as that

which had befallen my father, should have affected him painfully. But its consequences were totally different from what might have been expected. From the day of his young wife's death, Sir Harry Davenant became altogether a changed man. Grief, which, with most sensitive natures, is prone to soften the heart and enlarge the sympathies, seem, in his case, to have produced a directly contrary effect. It was as though his whole being had suddenly become hardened and demoralized, and the transition was made to appear the more surprising and unaccountable, from the fact of his having quitted England immediately after my mother's funeral, whither he did not return for the space of nearly two years, transformed, as I have just remarked, into an utterly new creature.

When, upon the day of my mother's death, Sir Harry had ridden home from hunting with Mr. Collingwood, a more genial, pleasant-looking country gentleman it would have been scarcely possible to behold. He must have been hard upon fifty at this time, but he appeared to be a good deal younger. He was tall and somewhat heavily built; his features were, perhaps, rather too massive and undefined to be positively handsome, but he had a frank, rosy, clean-shaved, English face, merry grey eyes, and a set of magnificent teeth. In a word his whole aspect was jovial, hearty, and prepossessing.

How am I to describe the changed being who returned, two years afterwards, from abroad, without seeming to exaggerate?

This new man was tall and large-framed it is true, but yet not seeming nearly so tall as my father, several inches of his height being sacrificed to a decided stoop, and he was so thin that his clothes appeared to have all become too big for him. He had grown a coarse straggling beard, which entirely altered the character and proportion of his face, and his curly dark hair was now thin and grizzled. His eyes were hollow and bloodshot, and had a restless,

suspicious expression, entirely at variance with their frank, fearless, gaze, in the past. One might have imagined that he was either suffering from the remorse consequent upon some hidden crime, or that he was conscious of being undermined by some fatal disease.

So much for the change which had taken place in his appearance. Alas, in disposition he had altered even more than in face!

He had become surly, morose, and uncommunicative; went out usually at twilight, or else so early in the morning as to run no chance of falling in with any of his former neighbours and friends, for he seemed to have grown suspicious and mistrustful of everybody. He would ride sometimes — after a reckless, purposeless fashion—tiring out several horses in the course of the same day; at others, he would not stir out of doors once during the week. He went to bed at odd times; sitting up, generally, for more than half the night in a subterranean portion of the house where he had now established himself, and which was as far as possible from the cheerful apartments he had inhabited with my poor mother. In fact, it was as though everything that could remind him of his dead wife, instead of inspiring him with sentiments of tender regret, had grown positively hateful to him.

Towards myself, for instance, he no longer manifested the slightest affection. When, thinking to rouse him from his fits of solitary musing, the faithful Mason would take me to pay him a visit in his gloomy retreat, he used, generally, to order me up again to my nursery, in tones that filled me with terror, or else, upon occasions when he suffered me to stay with him, he would take no notice of me whatsoever, but remain moodily writing at his table, or sitting with his head buried in his hands. It soon became painfully evident to his household that there existed another cause for Sir Harry's altered manner and

appearance besides the grief which was presumably gnawing at his heart. In order, no doubt, to escape from the melancholy regrets which crowded upon him in his desolation my father had taken to drinking. In the past, it seems, he had had some tendency this way, which my mother's refining influence had been enabled to restrain within the limits of convivial joviality. Bad habits, however, like ill-weeds, "grow apace," and now that this restraint was removed, he seemed to have entirely lost all power of self-control. In the evening, in fact, he was scarcely ever sober, and his temper, when he was under this baneful and degrading influence, became violent and irritable in the extreme.

This painful state of things increased as I grew in stature, until, by the time that I was ten years old, my father was generally spoken of in the neighbourhood as "poor Sir Harry," whilst his former friends would tap their foreheads significantly whenever they had occasion to mention his name.

CHAPTER III.

I WILL pass over the uneventful days of my childhood, and resume my narrative at the period when I was between sixteen and seventeen years of age.

Ever since I was about thirteen I had had a governess —Miss Warden by name; my existence, consequently, from this time, had been much less desolate.

I do not know who could have suggested to Sir Harry that a governess would be essential to my welfare—my welfare appeared now to concern him so very little. He held no kind of communication with any of our neighbours, at the same time he seemed to be hardly rational enough

to have evolved the notion from his own brain. Perhaps he may have received an application or recommendation upon the subject from some one who pitied my forlorn condition, and as he was now frequently absent from home, it may have occurred to him, in a lucid interval, that if he secured the services of some lady who could serve as my chaperon and instructress, he would save himself both trouble and responsibility in the future.

Miss Warden, at this time, was a lady of what is termed "an uncertain age," between thirty-five and forty-five, that is to say, as far as I could judge by her appearance. She was plain, both in figure and feature, but with a plainness which was not in the least displeasing. She had large, kind, brown eyes, an irregular nose, a swarthy complexion, and a wide mouth, which, however, seemed to be always smiling.

What a gushing, enthusiastic, tender-hearted creature she was! Many people, I daresay, might have called her a foolish woman. Her very womanliness, however, stood her in good stead sometimes, enabling her, through a sort of intuitive feminine instinct (given us, as she was wont to inform me, in order to protect us from man—though I hardly think that she could have had much need of any such protection), to arrive at tolerably correct conclusions without the aid of reason.

Her worst failing was, perhaps—seeing that I possessed the same weakness myself, and that she was in the position of my mentor—that she was so incorrigibly romantic, and expectant for ever of some dramatic and sensational occurrence. As yet, indeed, there had been little in her life at Northover to justify these expectations, but, failing the combinations and complications which are usually favourable to the development of romantic situations, she would fasten eagerly upon the very scantiest food in order to minister to this insatiable craving. We could not fall in with the village apothecary during our walks, or receive

a visit from the new curate, without a declaration upon her part that "the plot" was "decidedly thickening," whilst an excusable personal vanity, mingling with the sincere affection she bore me, caused her to regard as imminent the advent of handsome and desirable suitors for us both.

Our days, at about this time, were ordered somewhat after the following fashion :—

Supposing that the weather was fine, we generally repaired out of doors soon after breakfast, where I went through as many of my studies as could be conveniently pursued there, in an old-fashioned summer-house (a favourite resort, as I was told, of my poor mother's), at one end of the terraced flower-garden. Then we returned to the house, where I used to practice music and drawing, in which accomplishments I soon out-distanced my instructress, having some natural taste for the arts to which she had only been driven by the requirements of her calling. She had not much love, I fancy, either, for serious study, and our holidays and half-holidays proved greater treats to her than they did to me. She was cheerful and sociable by nature, delighting in conversation and gossip, whereas, at this time, I was somewhat inclined towards solitude. But for the voluminous letters which she was in the habit of writing home to an aged mother, however, I doubt whether I should have been often able to indulge myself in this respect. I was very fond of day-dreaming and castle-building. My mind seemed, at this time, to be teeming with all sorts of fantastic and picturesque visions, and I liked to have leisure to dwell upon these, and to set them in some kind of order.

I was enabled to arrive at this end in two ways, supposing that the weather favoured my designs.

I was enthusiastically fond of riding, whilst, next to my poor father (of whom she had always stood in the greatest terror), and after dogs, cows, oxen, and all horned creatures,

Miss Warden's keenest apprehensions seemed to be associated with the horse. She had never ridden in her life, and felt nervous, she said, in every kind of vehicle, excepting an omnibus. By ordering my horse, therefore, I could always escape my governess's amiable prattle. At other times, when I experienced this inordinate craving for solitude and self-examination, I used to sally forth, whilst Miss Warden was writing home, laden with my drawing materials; and, once out of doors, I would plunge into the most inaccessible thicket, or make my way towards that part of the park which was furthest from the house, thus effectually eluding my governess when she came out to seek for me.

During these solitary rides and rambles—for my old friend Tom Pearse, promoted now to the place of coachman, only accompanied me riding when I went outside the park, or in a direction where there were gates to open—I used to muse upon a variety of different subjects.

From the moment when I had at length mastered the mystery of reading, I devoured, with the greatest avidity, most of the romances which I found in the well-stocked library at Northover House. Some of these I did not wholly comprehend at the time, some, perhaps, it would have been better had I never comprehended at all.

Having begun by poring eagerly over such works as treated of brigands, ghosts, knight-errants, and perilous adventures, I had come, as I advanced towards woman's estate, to prefer those of a more natural kind, descriptive of events which did not seem to be too improbable of occurrence. I delighted in passionate love-scenes, and usually became desperately enamoured of the hero of my book very soon after making his acquaintance. In this respect, indeed, I was dangerously susceptible, and terribly unfaithful as well, to my book-loves, my heart often warming towards more than one character in the same novel. I remember that I was in love with "Ivanhoe," for in-

stance, and the Knight Templar, in spite of his lawless ferocity, at the same time. "The Master of Ravenswood," I confess, reigned, whilst he reigned at all, supreme in my affections; but I succumbed, very soon afterwards, to the brutal fascinations of "Mr. Rochester" (so rarely alluded to as "Edward" by the humble little heroine!), upon his black horse "Mesrour," and was never in the least surprised that "Jane Eyre" should have preferred him—mad wife and all—to the saintly and ascetic St. John, so egotistically intent upon the salvation of his own soul! "Eugene Aram," however, supplanted him before long in my affections. I remember how miserable I felt when he was found dead in his prison cell, and that my melancholy was greatly intensified by the knowledge that his tragical story was founded upon fact.

So I used to read on and on, identifying myself, to an almost painful degree, with the joys and sorrows of these and of many other creatures of the imagination. I liked my books, at this time, to be long, in order that I might become thoroughly acquainted with the personages described, and would toil through romances which I have found it impossible even to skim at a later period—books which would rejoice the heart, no doubt, of some shipwrecked Crusoe, with unlimited time upon his hands, if they could be cast on shore with the tinned meats, but for the reading of which the crowded and hurried days of an ordinary existence seem to be hardly long enough.

I had a decided preference for heroes about whom there clung any shadow of mystery—of weirdness—or the suspicion of undiscovered crime. I liked to read of how they shrank from giving their guilty right hands in greeting, or went about, chiefly at midnight, shrouded in long black cloaks, and to feel that they were living under some sort of terrible ban.

The romantic and impressionable Miss Warden was the last person in the world to check this somewhat dangerous

learning, which was, I hope, rather the result of an active and vivid imagination than of any morbid craving for sensational horrors. She shared, in truth, the same weakness herself, and was, moreover, a sincere believer in ghosts, omens, and all those incomprehensible marvels which are spoken of, incongruously, as "the supernatural."

She used frequently to tell my fortune as well as her own, with cards, in order to penetrate the veil in which our future was shrouded. To do her justice, she seemed to be quite as anxious for my happiness and prosperity as for her own. I never completely mastered her manner of proceeding, although I have listened hundreds of times to her predictions, for, unless anything she said came like a response to what was already in my mind, I did not pay much attention to her prophetic utterances or to the method employed.

As far as I can remember, however, after shuffling the cards, she would give them into my hands and ask me to wish. After wishing, I used to cut them and hand them back to her, and she would then spread them out upon the table, sometimes massed together in a compact square, sometimes in the form of a fan; after which she would begin to count, a performance which had to be repeated several times.

I, meanwhile, sat pencil in hand, ready to set down upon paper what fell from the lips of the sybil. I came upon one of these scraps of paper quite recently, as I was looking over some old letters. The predictions recorded upon it must have been written down soon after this time, and by referring to it I am enabled to give the reader some notion of Miss Warden's system.

"One, two, three, four, five" (she would say, tapping each successive card with the tip of a paper-knife, which she used as a diviner's rod). "Ah! here is yourself, surrounded by company, chiefly composed of women; not all

of them are well-disposed towards you. Some of them seem to be jealous,—but here is a fair man (king of hearts) with most excellent intentions! One, two, three, four, five. Yes! He is very well off—a bachelor—did not make his money, but inherited it—spends it freely—chiefly upon himself—a man with a title—occupies a distinguished position abroad" (counting). "Ah! I thought so! He loves you tenderly! A powerful and devoted friend—would do anything to obtain your affection. More devoted, at present, to you than you are to him. But now who is this other man just at his elbow?" (counting). "Ah! the influence of this man will not be beneficial to you! He is a man of double character, and utterly unscrupulous! He will exercise a sinister effect upon your destiny if you permit him to become involved with it" (counting). "Yes! He appears to be mixed up, or connected, in some way, with the heart king, through a diamond woman of a very evil disposition.

"These two men seem to be staying in the same house, and you appear to be there too, but the house is not your home. Possibly you may go somewhere on a visit, or be invited to some kind of entertainment, for I find you in the midst of company again. Now for your wish!" (counting). "It has something to do with these two fair kings. The diamond man seems, somehow, to act as an impediment. Much delay and vexation in store for you before you can obtain it. Several long journeys. A shorter journey first, with marriage at the end of it (there, you see, is the ring). Journeying again, from place to place—not altogether pleasant journeys. Great surprise!" (counting) "of a very unpleasant and tragical nature—(Do look at all those horrid black cards!)—having to do with fair man, who is surrounded by the worst cards. I must see what all this means" (counting). "Yes, extremely unpleasant disclosures! Vexations and humiliations, followed by death of a spade man in good

position, who is in some way related to you, but has become estranged—possibly your poor papa. More journeys. Illness. Another death. Brilliant assemblages. Tragic death of a fair man, which will prove the greatest relief to you. Same diamond woman, with evil heart, who is related to fair man, to be particularly mistrusted. She will do you an injury if she can. Her machinations are abominable. Wish is connected with club king, who will have recently changed his title and his house. Obstacles. Scandals and back-bitings. Another great surprise. More journeyings. Final triumph, with realisation of wish," &c. &c. &c.

With so many varied incidents to select from, it was not to be wondered at, perhaps, if some of these random sentences may have seemed, later on, to have had about them the ring of true prophecy.

CHAPTER IV.

And George Collingwood—my god-father, my parents' dear friend, the man who, upon the occasion of my poor mother's death, had wetted my infant cheek with his tears—had he never crossed our threshold since that ever-to-be-remembered day? Not to my knowledge. It is probable that Sir Harry, who could not fail, when in his presence, to be reminded of one of the most miserable days of his life, may have purposely avoided bringing about a meeting with him. Then, too, Mr. Collingwood, after acting as secretary of Embassy at several European courts, had been appointed minister somewhere in South America—a post which he had accepted with reluctance, and merely as a stepping-stone to something nearer home, for his father was now a very old man, and he was anxious

not to continue so far away from him. In a few years he was fortunate enough to get transferred to a more eligible post, but he was too far off, even now, to make it easy for him to visit our neighbourhood very often; it was not wonderful, therefore, if I had never seen him at Northover since the sad occasion to which I have referred.

Twice, however, during one of his flying visits to England, I had fallen in with him during my afternoon ride.

Upon the first occasion I was returing home, after having been to our nearest town, when he overtook me, riding, likewise, upon the turnpike road. I had a good memory, and he seemed to me to be but little altered. All the same, I am not sure whether I should have recognised him as I passed, had he not followed and greeted me first. I was about fifteen or sixteen at this time, I should think, so that about ten years had elapsed since our last meeting. Tom Pearse, however, in the Davenant livery, was riding behind me, so that it could not have required much effort on his part to guess who I might be.

The affection I had felt for Mr. Collingwood when I was quite a little girl seemed to rush back into my heart when I looked into his face, and saw his eyes seeking mine with an unmistakeable expression of tender emotion. He talked about old times, reminded me of the famous romps that we used to have in the old nursery, inquired whether my father was now at Northover, made no allusion whatever to my mother, and then parted with me at the lodge-gate, after informing me that I was not in the least changed, that he would have known me "amongst a thousand," and that he would make a point of riding the same way upon the following afternoon, in the hope of falling in with me again.

I met him next day, according to his implied desire, and after riding for a short way along the highroad we turned in at a gate which led to a secluded part of his father's park.

Perhaps I ought here to describe the man whose name will have to appear so frequently in this narrative.

At the time of which I am writing, George Collingwood must have been about five-and-forty. He looked, however, a great deal younger, and, as he rode by my side upon his showy chestnut, I thought him exceedingly handsome. My maturer judgment obliges me to confess, however, that he did not possess what could correctly be termed a handsome feature in his whole face, which owed its great charm to its intelligence and mobility of expression. It seemed, indeed, to be able to say anything he wished to express without the assistance of words, and had the power of looking happier, merrier, or more miserable, than any other face I have since beheld. He was tall and well-built, fair-complexioned, with expressive eyes, hair a little darker than his moustaches, but for which he was clean shaved—and was possessed of a particularly insinuating voice, manner, and address. He had the reputation, as I have since heard, of being "utterly irresistible" to women, and was supposed to have broken hearts in almost every capital in Europe. Small wonder, therefore, if I, an inexperienced girl of sixteen, found his society agreeable and fascinating in the highest degree!

He made me feel, before I had been more than ten minutes in his company, that he was really and truly devoted to me, and genuinely delighted to have me riding with him thus, and he possessed the rare charm of *appearing*, at any rate, to be far more interested in my pursuits and aspirations than in anything connected with himself. He asked me a great many questions as to my every-day life; whether I had a governess; whether she was French or English; what studies I preferred; what book I was in the habit of reading; and whether we saw much company at Northover House?

I told him everything he desired to know about my uneventful existence, and informed him that, owing to the

unsatisfactory state of my father's health, no visitors ever crossed the threshold of my home. He appeared to be deeply, unaccountably, interested in all I said, considering —as I thought to myself—how many more important matters he must have had to occupy him. It was a lovely autumnal afternoon, and I enjoyed my ride immensely. We separated, as upon the previous day, at the entrance to Northover Park.

"Now that I've discovered all about your manners and customs," he said, as he bade me farewell, "I've no doubt I shall be able to fall in with you, somehow, whenever I run over to England. Don't quite forget me, dear Helen, in the meantime, for you know that we are very, very old friends!"

He looked at me, as he spoke, with an expression of regretful yearning, which I might, perhaps, have mistrusted had I known, at this time, that he was such a redoubtable "lady-killer"; and then, after wringing my hand very hard, he rode off suddenly, as though he dared not trust himself to say more.

CHAPTER V.

THE next time that we met was upon what proved to be a memorable occasion, as far as I was concerned.

About four or five miles from Northover there lived an old-fashioned couple of the name of Ingleby, at a beautiful old Elizabethan manor-house, known as Ingleby Grange.

Mr. Ingleby was one of our county Members; he was also a master of fox-hounds, and was high sheriff for the year of which I am writing. Besides this, he was a man of large property and considerable wealth; over and over again he had refused both a baronetcy and a peerage;

preferring to be known as plain John Ingleby, like his father and grandfather before him. Nevertheless, he possessed immense influence in the county; and at the time when "poor Sir Harry" had conducted himself like a rational being "Jack Ingleby" had been one of his most intimate friends.

Mr. and Mrs. Ingleby were childless, and well-advanced in years, but they delighted in keeping open house at Ingleby Grange, and were never better pleased than when it was enlivened by the presence of youths and maidens.

When it became known in the neighbourhood that I had arrived at woman's years,—for I am writing now of the summer which followed upon my nineteenth birthday,—Mrs. Ingleby had, more than once, driven over to see me; and, upon the last of these occasions, which was when my father was again absent from home, she had been loud in her expressions of motherly sympathy for my forlorn condition.

I assured her, speaking with perfect sincerity, that I was not at all discontented with my lot; and that I did not think that I should care for a life of gaiety and excitement. She replied, that it was impossible for me to know, as yet, whether I should like it or not; that I ought to be presented at court, and permitted to see something of the world, for that it was unnatural for a young creature like me to be mewed up in almost total solitude, and then departed,—filled, as I could not fail to perceive, with all kinds of benevolent projects for my future good,—after depositing two of Mr. Ingleby's cards upon the hall-table with due formality. Only a little while afterwards—just at the conclusion of the London season, as I was informed—but of such times and seasons I knew as yet next to nothing—a Royal Duke, having occasion to visit our neighbourhood for some important function, accepted an invitation to remain for the night at Ingleby Grange. A select company was invited to meet him at dinner; after-

wards there was to be a dance, and to this dance Mrs. Ingleby kindly invited both Miss Warden and myself; nor would she listen to any of the objections which I put forward, in my nervousness at the notion of being thus unexpectedly hurried into the world. My father, she said, could surely not disapprove of my going to the house of such very old friends; but my father's objections were not what I feared. He was away from home, as he was almost invariably now, having taken bachelor apartments in London; and he displayed too little interest in me, and my doings, for me to think of troubling him with a letter upon a subject which he would have considered so trivial and unimportant. What was exercising my mind, in reality, was, whether I could be quite sure of my dancing steps, wherewithal I should be clothed, and how I should find it possible to converse easily with a number of total strangers. Miss Warden, however, who was enchanted at the thought of accompanying me upon the occasion of my first appearance in public, and who prided herself upon her experience in all matters relating to female attire, promised to take all trouble off my hands. A white ball-dress was made for me in London from measurements which she furnished. Mason, my former nurse, who was now my personal attendant, and a most excellent needlewoman, rectified such trifling errors as required attention, and the cards having distinctly foretold, for the second or third time, that we should meet not only a most brilliant assembly, but also the bachelor heart king and the diamond man of double character, we set off for Ingleby Grange upon the evening of the ball in the highest state of excitement and anticipation.

I fancy that, at this time, I must have been what most people would call pretty; not because I admired my own face at all, but because of the effect which I perceived at once that it seemed capable of producing upon others—an effect which led me to infer that it must have possessed

some sort of charm. I was rather tall for a woman; my complexion was fair, but my eyes and hair were dark; and I think I had that kind of unusual appearance which is apt to attract notice in a crowd. Sometimes I surprised myself, looking very like a portrait of my mother which had been hidden away by Sir Harry in a lumber-room, and upon which I had chanced one day, when seeking for the large bird-cage that used to stand by her sitting-room door. But her face, as I could remember it in life, seemed to me to have possessed none of the defects which I could perceive in my own.

"You look quite lovely, Helen," Miss Warden whispered to me (to give me confidence, no doubt) as we entered the ball-room; but then I could hardly regard her as an impartial judge!

Our hostess received me with effusive kindness. The Royal Duke was standing by her side, and I was presented to him at once. His Royal Highness perceiving, no doubt, by reason of my obvious perturbation, that this was my first public appearance, endeavoured to put me at my ease by the affability of his conversation. New guests, however, kept on arriving, entailing fresh presentations, so that it was not long before I was able to rejoin Miss Warden, who had been hovering near me by the doorway, and who took occasion to remark, that if all Princes possessed the delightful manner of His Royal Highness, "we should never hear anything more of those horrible radicals and republicans. . . . . But there are *two* Princes here to-night!" she added triumphantly, as she glanced towards the further end of the long room; "that tall, very handsome young man there, talking to that other man, I have just been told is a prince also; not an English one,—a Russian, or a Wallachian, or a Bulgarian, with a totally unpronounceable name." I looked in the direction indicated, and perceived a tall, distinguished-looking man, wearing several orders upon his breast.

He was leaning against a pillar, in conversation with some one whose face I could not see. His appearance struck me at once, as interesting and imposing. "If you are introduced to him, and if he asks you to dance," whispered my amiable but injudicious chaperon, "I shall feel perfectly certain that he is the 'heart king'!" I danced my first valse with a youth of the neighbourhood, and, in the course of it, found myself at the further end of the room. My partner paused to make a little conversation and I perceived that we were close to the distinguished foreigner, and that the person with whom he was conversing was none other than my old friend Mr. Collingwood.

My godfather must have been watching my movements, for he came up to me at once.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," he said, addressing my partner, who was evidently an acquaintance, "but I want to ask Miss Davenant for the pleasure of the next dance; that is, if she can forgive me my grey hairs?"

I perceived no grey hairs. He looked young and charming as ever, and the sight of him had the effect of immediately restoring my confidence.

When my dance with him was over, the foreign Prince crossed the room, and coming towards us, begged Mr. Collingwood, with whom it appeared he was staying, to introduce him to me, and after this introduction he invited me to dance the next valse.

His name, as Miss Warden had remarked, seemed to be "utterly unpronounceable," nor did I, indeed, make any attempt to pronounce it.

Now that I was nearer to him, I did not think that he looked particularly young. Five-and-thirty, or forty, at least, I should have said, if he had been an Englishman, but then Englishmen have a way of looking younger for their age than the natives of any other country upon the face of the globe. His hair was so exceedingly light, and

colourless, that, at first, I fancied that it must have turned prematurely grey, but his complexion was not of that fresh ruddy kind which is generally the accompaniment of extreme fairness. He had the somewhat lined and bloodless look, which I have since perceived in many of the inhabitants of northern latitudes, where it is customary to pass from the intensity of outward cold to the extremes of artificial heat, and to be alternately nipped by the breath of frosts and parched by the warmth of stoves. His face was short, broad-browed, of rather a Kalmuc type, with high cheek-bones, a straight small nose, heavy fair moustaches, and eyes set somewhat obliquely. They were very handsome eyes, however, utterly different from any other eyes that I had ever beheld, of a light transparent colour, like green sea-water, singularly luminous and brilliant, with dark lashes and brows, which contrasted oddly, but picturesquely, with his fair hair. I have since thought that his eyes were a little like those of a lynx—bright, fascinating—dominating, by their size, the rest of the countenance, and having in them, now and then, just a gleam of something wild and untamable.

He spoke English perfectly, too well, indeed, for an Englishman, but beyond this extreme correctness of expression there was nothing in his accent to show that he was a foreigner. He informed me that, as children, he and his only sister had always had French and English governesses, and that he fancied that he knew these two languages, in consequence, almost better than his own, as it had always been his habit, as a boy, to speak in French, and think in English. He danced beautifully, and seemed, I thought, to be of a very quiet, simple, unpretending nature, speaking seriously, and a little wearily, with the manner of one who has come to the end of the emotional and enthusiastic epoch of existence, and whose interest is concentrated less upon the present than upon the past.

After our dance, he asked me to come with him through the reception-rooms. He was only remaining in England, he said, a few weeks longer, and was anxious to see something of its country-houses, of which he had heard so much.

When we had made the round of the apartments, we came to a tea-room, where he asked for a cup of coffee for himself and for me. We sat down together upon a sofa not far from the doorway, whence we could look down the entire length of the brilliantly-lighted rooms. A strange sensation, as of passive subjection to the power of a superior will, seemed to come over me as I listened to the Prince's calm and somewhat monotonous voice.

"In my country, in Poland," he was saying (so he was neither a Russian, a Wallachian, nor a Bulgarian, after all!) "existence is very much more simple than it is here. We live rather after a primitive patriarchal fashion, which is not wanting in a certain picturesqueness. . . . . There is what would seem to you, no doubt, a strange mixture of barbarism and magnificence, but we have nothing whatever of your unostentatious comfort—nothing of that kind!"

He waved his hand—which, I noticed, was beautifully shaped—as he spoke, in the direction of the long suite of reception-rooms, and then, looking fixedly in my face, he said, before I had had time to make any rejoinder:

"Have you ever been told, mademoiselle, that you were very strongly magnetic, or mediumistic? that you were possessed of remarkable mesmeric power?"

"Never!" I answered, surprised at his words. "What can have made you fancy this?"

"Because I am my myself very strongly mesmeric, and I am impressionable, also, in this respect, to an extraordinary degree. I perceived, from the first moment of speaking to you, that I was in the presence of an opposing force. I should be powerless, I imagine, ever to dominate you?"

"But you were trying to dominate me?" I asked feeling alarmed. "You were trying some sort of experiment or incantation upon me? I could feel that you were!"

"Ah! you could feel it!" he said, with quiet satisfaction; "then your climate has not deprived me of my most valuable family inheritance!"

He smiled dreamily, and then went on stirring and sipping his coffee in silence.

I shall never quite know how much may have been purely imaginary, the mere result of his words, or how much there was of reality in what I now seemed to experience. Certain it was that I again felt a sense of helplessness, an impossibility, almost, of independent physical action. My mind, however, seemed to be fighting against this unusual restraint.

"My body is in your power somehow," I felt compelled to avow, "but my mind is determined to resist you. You cannot get any power over my mind!"

"I wonder if it is so?" he murmured, looking at me curiously. "But *now*, even your physical action is restored to you again? You can rise up and go whereever you wish, can you not?"

"Yes, I am free now!" I answered, smiling, and giving myself a little shake. "How did you learn such an extraordinary power?"

"It came to me by right of inheritance," he answered. "We were all possessed of it in a greater or lesser degree. It is partly a fiction in our family, mingled with all sorts of fantastic legends, and partly, as you have experienced, a fact. As the members of our race become fewer, so, according to the tradition, does this faculty become the more potent and concentrated with those individuals that remain. Only two of us are living at the present moment, my sister and myself, so that we ought, between us, to possess it in a marked degree."

"And what is it, exactly?" I inquired; "the power of

being able to mesmerise people? You spoke of it just now as a mesmeric power."

"I called it so because I know not how else to describe it. But I rather regard it, myself, as an inherited primitive instinct. We possess still, as a people, many of the characteristics of the uncivilized man, characteristics which were implanted in us, originally, for our own protection, and which have not yet been stifled and overgrown with artificial productions. Just as you find that one dog will carry your stick, that another will dive for a stone, and a third run after a hare; so, also, the primitive races were distinguished by certain physical and mental peculiarities. These, again, became subject to variations in different families. The inheritance of our race has hitherto taken the form of an extraordinary susceptibility to all spiritual and magnetic influences. We are "*sensitives*," and we recognise at once our relative positions when in the presence of other personalities. Given certain favourable conditions, we are able to dominate and control these others in their volitional power. When the conditions, on the contrary, tell against us, it is all the other way."

Now that he admitted thus, quite openly and honestly, that he could scarcely claim to be considered a really civilised being, I felt that I could forgive him the wild beast look which I fancied I had observed in his eyes. Probably I was only confronting, for a moment, the primitive man!

Before he had time to say more, I saw Mr. Collingwood coming towards us from the ball-room. A curious look, as of vexation, or jealousy, I knew not which, came into his expressive face when he perceived us.

"Well, my dear Hugo," he exclaimed, addressing his Polish friend, "are you aware that you are monopolising the star of the evening, and that half-a-dozen of our 'gilded youth' are pacing up and down in the other room,

tearing out their hair in handfuls? I will venture to bet, Miss Helen, that he has been trying to convert you to his views upon mesmerism, spiritualism, and electro-biology, and trying to weave about you all sorts of occult spells. Let me release you from the power of the enchanter!"

He offered me his arm as he finished speaking, and we returned together to the ball-room.

The Prince rose also, and followed behind us, seeming grave and abstracted. I danced again, several times, before the end of the evening, and was conscious that his lynx eyes were fixed upon me all the while.

Mr. Collingwood, I found, had made the acquaintance of Miss Warden, and had taken her into supper, with the view of ascertaining everything about me—as he said. He had thought her a very good natured and pleasant person, with excellent manners.

"But what I like in her best," he added, "is her evident devotion to you."

When it was time for us to depart he escorted us to the carriage. Whilst we were waiting for it in the hall, I asked him to tell me the Prince's correct name.

He repeated it slowly, pronouncing each syllable distinctly: "'Prince Crecszoleski,' Christian name, 'Hugo.'"

"I shall never be able to remember it," I said; "I wish you could have written it for me."

He drew a letter from his pocket, tore off a scrap of it, and wrote down the name in pencil.

"Think of the crackling of a bag of biscuits if you happen to lose this," he said, as he handed me the slip of paper.

"The Prince is a most distinguished looking individual," Miss Warden remarked in the course of our homeward drive, "but I must say there is, to my mind, something a little 'Eugene Aramy' about him. Probably, however, this is only because he is a conspirator. All the Poles, I believe, are conspirators, and belong to secret societies

for assassinating the Russians. The plot is decidedly thickening!"

CHAPTER VI.

Whilst I was dressing, next morning, my mind was filled with impressions connected with my first ball, amongst which the Polish Prince had naturally an important place. My feelings with regard to him were of a curiously mixed kind. From having lived so much alone—in *mental*, rather than physical, loneliness—I had acquired a habit of more minute self-examination than is usual with young people, and the question I found myself asking, now was, Why, considering this very heart-loneliness, I had not been more affected by the interest which an attractive and distinguished man had certainly evinced in me? Why, in a word—with all my yearning for the romantic, and my belief in a theory of predestination, and the intense *besoin d'aimer* which lay at my heart—had I not immediately succumbed to the charms of this handsome foreign Prince, and fallen "head over ears" in love with him upon the spot? I recognised, now that I was no longer fettered by the mysterious power which was the birthright of the Crecszoleskis, that I had felt for the Prince an interest which was entirely devoid of any tender sympathy. He had dominated me, in a measure, it is true, for the short time during which it had pleased him to exert his hereditary gift; but I had been fascinated without being touched. Nevertheless, as I thought about him now, I realised that he had at least ministered to my girlish vanity, and that I should certainly like to see him just once more—by daylight—if only to ascertain whether I had formed a correct estimate of his personal appearance. The scrap of paper

upon which Mr. Collingwood had written his name, was lying crumpled up on the dressing-table, by the side of my fan and lace pocket-handkerchief. I smoothed it out, and spelt over to myself the "totally unpronounceable name," which, however, I flattered myself I had completely mastered now.

As I examined the paper by the morning light, I perceived that there was something written upon the other side of it, which Mr. Collingwood had probably not remarked, for the characters were extremely small, and written in faint bluish ink. A woman's handwriting, evidently; and evidently, too, the writing of a woman who was not English. The words spoke for themselves:—"And now, once more, *adieu, Excellence!*" (they ran) "*à tout jamais, peut-être!* In remembrance of that which appears to have departed beyond all hope of recall, I must again entreat your good offices *auprès de mon cher frère Hugo*, who will probably not remain in England longer than a few weeks."

The Prince's sister, I gathered from these lines—the only other surviving member of this remarkable family—had been acquainted with Mr. Collingwood in the past, and her brother's visit to our neighbourhood had probably been due to this connecting link.

Breakfast was announced before I had proceeded much further with my reflections; and, on going downstairs, I found Miss Warden already in the dining room.

As I had anticipated, she, too, was over-flowing with impressions of the previous night. She was convinced, of course, that the foreign Prince had fallen in love with me at first sight. Such things happened constantly; one read of them in books; besides which, it had all been foretold by the cards! She had been informed that he belonged to one of the oldest families in Poland; that, unlike some foreign Princes, he owned vast possessions; that he had occupied several distinguished appointments, and

was unmarried. All this, too, had been distinctly foretold. Then Mr. Collingwood—what a delightful person! so clever, so well-informed, so fascinating! *He*, too, she felt convinced, was hopelessly smitten by my charms.

"Mr. Collingwood," I protested, amused at her fatuity, "a man old enough to be my father!"

"People constantly marry husbands who are a good deal older than themselves," returned Miss Warden, cheerfully. "Look at the case of your poor Mama. Mr. Collingwood seems to be quite devoted to you; and to me he seems like a young man."

"Well, at any rate it won't be possible for me to marry them both!" I said laughing.

"There could be no reason—under ordinary circumstances—why anybody should be anxious for you to marry at all," replied my governess, assuming a more serious air. "People are often very happy in a single state; but your position, my dear, I can't help confessing, is, in some respects, unfortunate. It is *exceptional*, at any rate; and it would be of the greatest importance to your future happiness if you could make an advantageous marriage whilst you are young. Sometimes—as in my own case—we are apt to defer this step until it is rather late!" and she looked down at her plate and sighed.

"I can assure you I am in no hurry to marry," I exclaimed. "I am quite contented living on here as I am."

"It would be different if you could go on living here always," returned Miss Warden, gravely; "but supposing anything were to happen to your poor papa, who is now over sixty, and far from being in a satisfactory state of health? This place could be no longer your home. Mrs. Ingleby was going about last night speaking of you as 'the beautiful heiress,' and it is evident, my dear, that you will be exceedingly well off, for there are certain possessions—according to Mr. Collingwood, who seems to know all

about you—which are bound to come to you immediately upon the death of Sir Harry; whilst Croft's Farm—that delightful little place where your poor mother used to live before she married—reverts to you as soon as you are twenty-one. Northover House, however, where you have lived all your life, and the property which lies round about it, will pass away to your cousin, Colonel Courtenay Davenant."

"Yes, I know that," I answered; "though I didn't know that cousin Courtenay had become a Colonel."

"He is only a Colonel in the Guards, which, it seems, is equivalent to a Captain in any other regiment. He has got on capitally in his profession (I learnt all this from Mr. Collingwood), and has now been appointed military *attaché* somewhere—a very eligible post. He's very clever and good-looking, just ten years older than you are, and, if only you two could have married, there would have been a way out of the difficulty at once."

"Ah! So I am to be married to *him*, now! What shall I do with my other two admirers?"

"This marriage with your cousin, however," Miss Warden continued, without heeding me, "seems, now, very unlikely to take place."

She said no more, but sighed, and went on with her breakfast. Her remark excited my curiosity. She seemed, I thought, to have imbibed an immense amount of information in the course of a single night!

"Is my cousin going to be married to anybody else?" I inquired of her by-and-by.

"Not that I know of; Mr. Collingwood, at least, did not say so. But he saw your cousin not long ago, in London, before he had received this new appointment, and he said then, it seems, that he had quite given up all idea of what he alluded to as 'the family marriage project.'"

"By which he meant his possible marriage with me?"

"Yes; Mr. Collingwood may not have intended me to

repeat all this, but I'm doing so entirely for your own good. It appears that your cousin knows Mr. Collingwood well, and is, besides, a great friend of a young Collingwood, a nephew of your godfather's, who is in the same regiment with him, and who sometimes visits down here. Colonel Davenant, therefore, knew a good deal about your poor papa's odd ways, and of the dull life you lead at Northover. He asked a good many questions about you, but I fancy that Mr. Collingwood was the first to allude to the marriage project, from what he said, and then it was that Colonel Davenant told him he had entirely given up all notion of it, although, at one time, he had thought that it would have been advantageous both to himself and the property."

I felt piqued in spite of myself.

"He might have taken the trouble, first, to find out whether I should have agreed to it!" I said with some warmth; "a person can hardly 'give up' a thing that has never been within their reach!"

"Well, my dear, if he had thought fit to propose to you, I should hope that you would not have been so foolish as to throw away so good a chance, for it would certainly have been one of the most satisfactory arrangements possible! Colonel Davenant, however, thinks differently. He has always objected, upon principle, to the union of first cousins, and was only led to contemplate this marriage because it had been a favourite scheme of his father's. Lately, however, he has become confirmed in his first opinion. He looks, now, upon the relationship as an insurmountable barrier."

"Why *now*, more than at first?"

"Because of things which have since occurred—unfortunate circumstances."

"Nothing that *I* can have done?" I inquired eagerly.

"No, no, dear; far from it! And it seems indeed hard that you should suffer for what isn't in the least your

fault. Mr. Collingwood seemed very much concerned about it. He said it was utter nonsense to object to the cousinship. But the subject is such a painful one that I hardly like to allude to it."

"Ah, but you must tell me everything, now that you have said so much!" I exclaimed. "Mr. Collingwood shall never know that you repeated his words."

"Well, then, dearest Helen, disapproving as Colonel Davenant did, of such marriages in the abstract, he had gradually come to the conclusion that, in this particular case, one might have been possible, until it came to his knowledge that——"

She hesitated, and began cutting her toast into an infinity of little pieces.

I felt impatient and apprehensive to an intense degree.

"Until *what* came to his knowledge?" I eagerly inquired.

"Until he discovered that there was a tendency to madness in the family. You have made me tell you everything now!"

"He considers that poor papa is mad?"

"He considers that he displays a tendency that way; and you know, dear, that he is not the only person who thinks this. You see now what I meant when I said that your position was rather unfortunate—not quite so brilliant as it seemed. Your cousin has been prevented, on this account, from making you an offer of marriage, even when it would be greatly to the advantage of the estate. Other people may, very likely, be prevented too. Poor Sir Harry is no kind of companion to you. He will never be able to introduce you into London society, or receive visitors here. His death, it is true, would probably silence all these distressing rumours; but then you will have to turn out of your old home. Your cousin was very determined in his opinion, it seems; nothing Mr. Collingwood said could shake him."

I remained silent for some time. It did not surprise me much to hear that Sir Harry should be considered mad. Exaggerated accounts of his strange behaviour had probably reached my cousin Courtenay's ears, and I could not blame him for being influenced by them. It was not as though he had abandoned the idea of our marriage on account of anything he might have heard to my own disadvantage. I felt how utterly absurd it was of me to be affected in the least by what I had just learnt of Colonel Davenant's objections, considering that, as far as I could recollect, I had only seen him once in my life, and that was when I was little more than a baby. I was not quite ignorant of the fact that there had been some talk—chiefly amongst the servants and gossiping neighbours—of our eventual marriage; but I regarded this as merely a result of its becoming known, amongst meddlesome people, that I possessed a male cousin of a suitable age,—a marriage with whom might be to the advantage of the Northover estates.

I am bound to confess, however (desiring as I do to give in this narrative a description of my real feelings—however wrong or unreasonable they may have been), that the impression conveyed to me by Miss Warden's well-meant words was, that I had received some manner of unmerited slight at the hands of my absent and unknown kinsman. He seemed to have given up the idea of this marriage (I thought) without a single feeling of regret or compunction! It had never occurred to him, evidently, that I might be in any way loveable or attractive as a woman! I had been looked upon merely as a necessary element in "the family project," which was to be pursued or abandoned, just as it might seem good to him!

Without falling in with Miss Warden's ridiculous notions as to the effect which she imagined that I had produced—not only upon Mr. Collingwood (my own godfather!) but also upon the Polish Prince who had beheld

me last night for the first time—I certainly felt, at this moment, an intense desire to convince my cousin Courtenay, after some very decided fashion, that I could bear, with perfect equanimity, the idea of an existence without him; and that this voluntary abandonment of me, upon his part, would not necessarily condemn me to a life of celibacy!

CHAPTER VII.

ALL night long I could not sleep for thinking of what Miss Warden had told me.

With regard to my father, I could not bring myself to believe that he was really mad. My mother's sudden death had given his nervous system a violent shock. He had withdrawn himself entirely from all genial companionship, neglected his appearance, and shut himself up like a hermit. Then, with the laudable desire, probably, of returning once more to the duties and responsibilities of his former life—or else from a wish to drown his absorbing melancholy—he had had recourse to stimulants, the curse of so many unhappy low-spirited people, which, far from producing the desired effect, had reduced him to a condition which was even more deplorable than his previous state of despondency. "Poor Sir Harry" was a misanthrope—a drunkard—an irritable, miserable, unreasonable being—but surely not one that anybody could truthfully describe as actually insane?

After I had turned this subject well over in my mind, I began living, in imagination, the melancholy, monotonous, kind of existence which would probably be reserved for me if, as might be expected in the course of nature, I should survive my unfortunate father. I saw myself—no longer,

possibly, in the first flush of youth—packing up all the little belongings that I could legitimately lay claim to as my own, and turning my back for ever upon my old home—the house which my dear mother had graced with her beauty and enlivened by her smiles—wherein she had closed her eyes in death, and wherein my own had first opened to the light! I saw myself bidding a sad farewell to the garden, the old summer-house, all my favourite nooks and corners, and then driving off, with my baggage, to Croft's Farm—the little place which, in right of my mother, who had inherited it at the death of my uncle Everard, would accrue to me in spite of my sex. Everything, of course, would seem very new, and strange, and cramped, just at first, after having lived in such a much bigger house. In time, however, I should probably get used to the change. I could go on with my music and drawing—this would cheer me in my loneliness—and do some good amongst the poor. I should be able, I supposed, to afford a few horses, so that I could go for my usual rides. How odd it would seem, just at first, to pass by the Northover lodge-gates, without turning in at any of them! Miss Warden, if she had not been carried off by the wealthy and handsome husband who was so continually shadowed forth by the cards, might come and stay with me from time to time; or I might even be able to make some arrangement by which she should live with me altogether. If not, I could get a nice fluffy Persian cat, that I could grow fond of, or a dear, great, black, curly-backed retriever dog, with faithful brown eyes, and a tail that would begin wagging whenever he saw me coming! It would be better to have only a dog or a cat to care for than nothing at all!

So I mused on, "piling up the agony," until the tears begotten of a "sweet self-pity" fell fast and thick upon my pillow.

Never, until this moment, had I so thoroughly realised what my future was likely to be! What a desolate,

contracted, loveless kind of existence—scarcely, indeed, to be dignified by the name of an existence at all! An involuntary state of compulsory vegetation, which would go on until my time came to be cut down by the scythe of the grim reaper! What congenial spirit would ever take the trouble to seek me, once I was thus hidden and buried away from the civilised world! What fairy Prince would be likely to draw in his bridle-rein at the door of my humble and obscure abode! And all this while, up at Northover House—my dear, dear, lost home!—my cousin Courtenay would be lording it to his heart's content—married, of course, by that time, to the peerless lady of his choice, the perfect pearl, selected, after all due consideration, as worthy of so great an honour, whose family escutcheon and "bill of health" must be alike free from speck or blemish; and who would sometimes pay me patronising visits, perhaps, and invite me to go over to afternoon tea!

When I arose, next morning, I looked pale and dispirited. I felt as though, in a single night, I had acquired the wisdom of years, by the light of which I seemed to perceive that my cousin Courtenay was a kind of enemy, to be both feared and mistrusted.

At the breakfast-table these morbid feelings underwent a good deal of modification. Here I found Miss Warden, in a most pleasurable state of excitement. She had just received a letter of the greatest importance, in her opinion, to me. It was from Mr. Collingwood, and ran as follows:—

"DEAR MISS WARDEN,

"My guest, Prince Crecszoleski, seems to have a mania for looking at country-houses, as he says he is thinking of settling amongst us some day, and so, if quite convenient to yourself and the fair Helen, he proposes to walk over and pay you his respects to-morrow, at about two o'clock, when it will interest him much to be shown the house and the pictures.

"I shall not, I fear, be able to do myself the pleasure

of accompanying him, as I think I shall be obliged to go up to London upon important business at the F. O., but I will see that he is started off on the right road.

"Don't prepare luncheon for him, as he eats next to nothing. A cup of coffee, or green tea, is all that he will require. Of course, should you happen to be from home, or particularly engaged, he can go back by the way he came, as it is not customary, as you are aware, for young ladies to receive such visitors *en tête-à-tête*. With kindest remembrances to Miss Helen,

"I am, dear Miss Warden,

"Yours very truly,

"GEORGE COLLINGWOOD.

"P.S.—Give Czecszoleski *lemon* with his tea instead of cream; and, if you want to make him feel quite happy, let him smoke as many cigarettes as he pleases."

The "to-morrow" of Mr. Collingwood's letter was now "to-day," and Miss Warden was already in a flutter of anticipation.

"You see, Helen," she said, as I returned the letter to her after reading it, "the plot is thickening fast! This mania for looking at country-houses is merely a pretext! The Prince wishes to see you again, to obtain a footing in your home. I wish that Mr. Collingwood could have come too. We should have been four, then — a nicer number than three for private conversation in public, for I feel sure that the Prince has something particular to say to you. Don't you detect a ring of jealousy in Mr. Collingwood's letter — in his great anxiety, for instance, that you should not receive his friend *en tête-à-tête?*"

"I fancy he only wishes us to do what is considered the proper thing," I answered. "Princes are very likely more particular than other people, and Mr. Collingwood mayn't think we see enough of the world to know much of its ways. He tells you this just as he tells you to give the Prince lemon with his tea."

"I think quite differently, dear," returned Miss Warden looking extremely wise. "I think they are both very much smitten with you. Mr. Collingwood has had to go up to London to-day upon important business at the Foreign Office. The Prince, aware of this, has fixed upon to-day for his visit. Mr. Collingwood, feeling that the Prince is his guest, and that he will be obliged to leave him alone for the whole day (for I hear that Lord Silchester seldom now quits his own apartment), cannot naturally object, however much he might have wished to accompany the Prince. As he is unable to do so, he fires off this letter to me, in order to make sure that his guest shall not see you alone! That is how *I* read between the lines!"

I asked her why, if Mr. Collingwood entertained for me any such sentiments as she had imputed to him, he should have endeavoured to persuade my cousin Courtenay to adhere to the project of our marriage?

"You told me yesterday," I said, "that Mr. Collingwood declared that it was utter nonsense to object to the cousinship, and that he had tried to shake Courtenay's scruples but could not succeed."

"Ah, well! that certainly does seem a little inconsistent," she answered thoughtfully; "but then we must remember, dear, that Mr. Collingwood is a diplomatist! Diplomatists are never open or above-board in anything! Their trade is to conceal their real intentions. He may have wished to convince me, before he put forward his own views, that all possibility of your marriage with Colonel Davenant was at an end, in order that he might not appear to interfere with it. All the same, the Prince is evidently coming to see *you*, so that I certainly do not feel disposed to watch you both like a detective!"

As we now knew that Prince Crecszoleski never partook of luncheon, Miss Warden thought that it might be as well, perhaps, that we, too, should not seem to be too car-

nivorous, and that he should not find us, as she expressed it, "sitting like two ogres all surrounded by bones."

We had the remains of our luncheon, therefore, cleared away a little earlier than usual, and betook ourselves to the old summer-house in the garden, the day being beautifully fine, where we ordered that both tea and coffee should be brought out to us as soon as our visitor arrived.

Afterwards, should he prefer it, we could adjourn to the house, but Miss Warden, who persisted in believing that the Prince would desire to talk with me confidentially, and who yet did not intend altogether to disregard the hint conveyed in Mr. Collingwood's letter, thought that he would be able to speak to me more freely in the garden than within doors. She could remain at work in the summer-house, she said, whilst we two wandered about at our will—*only*, I was to imagine that her eyes were upon me all the time! In this way everybody would have reason to be satisfied.

I have alluded to this old summer-house before as one of my favourite resorts. My poor mother, too, as I had been told, was very fond of sitting in it, and this lent it an additional charm in my eyes.

The flower-garden, at Northover, was disposed in front of the principal windows after rather a formal fashion, upon a broad terrace, divided from the deer-park by a balustrade surmounted by urns and statues, beyond which the land dropped considerably. Level with this terrace, upon the higher ground, shady paths branched forth from each end of the garden, bordered upon the one side by high yew hedges, neatly clipped, and upon the other by the low stone balustrade overlooking the outer park.

Only a short distance down the path which led from the right, and parallel with the yew hedge, was situated the summer-house, so-called because another, a newer one, had been built at a more recent date, in the corresponding pathway to the left.

I much preferred the "old" summer-house of the two. It was deeper, more sequestered, and the view which lay extended in front of it, as one looked out through its rustic columns over the grey terrace-wall, was calm and beautiful in the extreme.

A broad extent of undulating park-land, well wooded with noble forest trees, and feathery with bracken, amongst which the fallow-deer would lie herded together in the hot summer days out of the way of the flies, with nothing of them visible save their branching antlers. To the left the ground became more broken and hilly, and a murmuring stream, shining out here and there from between bulrush and willow-weed, went wandering down the valley like a silver serpent. Beyond all this, upon very clear days, the blue line of the sea could be plainly discerned, kissing the sky, as it were, at the uttermost edge of the visible horizon.

Miss Warden and I had not been long established in this delightful retreat before a footman brought us out Prince Crecszoleski's card, and, looking across the lawn we saw him coming towards us from the drawing-room, the windows of which open upon the terrace.

CHAPTER VIII.

After partaking of coffee, which, in spite of all our forethought with regard to the lemon, Prince Crecszoleski preferred to green tea,—admiring the view and conversing upon general topics,—Miss Warden asked me whether I should not like to show the Prince over the rest of the garden before we repaired to the house. She appeared to be intent upon some complication in her knitting, and

displayed no sign of following us when we rose to act upon her suggestion.

"That good lady—your duenna—understands me exactly!" remarked the Prince, as soon as we were out of ear-shot. "She perceives that my visit was not to *her* but *to you!*"

I made no reply, not knowing, quite, what I ought to say, and we sauntered on past the house, and so down into the shady pathway to the left.

"So this is where you live!" he exclaimed, seeking my eyes, as though with melancholy interest. "This is the peaceful, beautiful, English home, where you have passed sixteen?—seventeen? How many years shall I say?"

"I am past nineteen," I answered, thinking that he wished, for some reason, to discover my age, and being too young, as yet, to wish to conceal it.

"Ah, but you look much younger," he remarked. "In no country do people look so young as here in England. What age would you give *me*, now, if you were obliged to guess?"

I looked up at his face, determined to say just what I thought.

He appeared no older by daylight than he did in the evening. I remarked the same lines in his face, the absence of all ruddy flesh tints, the dark shadows under his strange eyes, the serious, rather weary expression, with a curious gleam, now and again, as of the awakening of some more ardent instinct. His figure—tall, lithe, and distinguished-looking — seemed to be younger than his face.

"Thirty-six?" I hazarded, still contemplating his singular countenance with attention.

"Not yet thirty-four," he answered. "You see, you have aged me by more than two years! But then I have not lived always, like you, this peaceful home-life. Tell

me"—he added, suddenly—"does this existence of perpetual repose entirely satisfy the cravings of your nature? You are intelligent — observant — sympathetic. I can imagine that to those who have already battled, and suffered, in the outer world, this place must seem, as it seems to me at this moment, like a terrestrial paradise; but, previously to having had any such experiences? Do you feel no desire, sometimes, to do like this—to plunge out into what may be beyond?"

He placed his right hand lightly upon the flat coping-stone at the top of the balustrade as he spoke, and vaulted over it into the outer park. On account of the fall in the ground I was now some distance above him.

"Ah! you won't find it so easy to vault back again, Prince!" I said, looking down at him as I rested my elbows upon the stone parapet. "Perhaps I might find it the same if I quitted my quiet home."

"With your help," he answered, holding out his hand to me.

I took it, instinctively, fancying that he was about to vault back again and required my assistance. He walked on, however, still holding my hand, until we reached the spot where the stone balustrade was replaced by an iron railing. This he lept over easily, and we strolled on together walking side by side as before.

Whilst the Prince was holding my hand, I had again experienced the curious sensation, as of subjection to a superior will, which had oppressed me in the tea-room at Ingleby Grange. I felt it, however, in a less marked degree, and upon his relinquishing his hold it left me altogether.

We were quite close now to the summer-house corresponding to the one in which we had left Miss Warden. The Prince proposed that we should sit down and talk a little before rejoining my "duenna," as he called her.

"You are looking pale to-day, Mis Davenant," he said,

looking at me earnestly; "probably you are still suffering from the fatigues of the ball?"

"Oh, no! the ball didn't tire me in the least! But last night I could not sleep. My thoughts were too disagreeable."

"You sleep well, generally?" he inquired.

"Yes," I answered. "How could we live without sleep?"

"I am endeavouring to live without it now," he answered. "I am purposely trying, for the moment, to conquer my material impulses, in order to pursue some psychical experiments in which I am interested. Tell me," he added, and he gazed still more intently at my face, "my friend George—my amiable host—is he in any way related to you?"

"No," I answered, "he is no relation—only a very old family friend. Why do you ask?"

"You may not feel complimented, perhaps—in spite of his being so great a favourite with your sex—but the fact is, to a foreigner, as I am, English faces that are of the same type and complexion seem often to bear a kind of family likeness to one another, even when there is no cause for it. My friend George, in spite of his cosmopolitan experiences, will always be recognized wherever he goes as an Englishman; and you, too, Miss Helen, with your tall figure, your air *de Diane Chasseresse*, you could be nothing else but a daughter of "*la perfide Albion;*" and thus, just when you held up your head, so, and looked at me, I fancied that I perceived some kind of resemblance between you, which, joined to the great interest he seems to evince in you, made me think he might be a relation."

"No," I answered, "I have very few male relations living. Only my father and one cousin. It was a thousand pities that I was not a boy myself!"

I sighed, thinking of my possible future at Croft's

Farm, the Persian cat, the curly-backed retriever, and all the other consolations of desolate spinsterhood.

"If you had been a boy," returned the Prince, smiling —but rather sadly, I thought—"I should not be sitting here with you to-day!"

I was perfectly at my ease with him now, and felt, somehow, as if I had known him for a long time. His society, however, depressed me unaccountably. I felt that he was unhappy, restless, disappointed with his experience of life. I might have desired, perhaps,—being young and romantic,—to bring back his happiness, his peace of mind, his shattered illusions, but I was penetrated as with a sense of my inability to serve him adequately.

He attracted and repelled me in so strange a manner that I longed to discover some clue to the mystery.

By-and-by, seeing that I was about to return to the garden-terrace, he said earnestly—

"Miss Helen, just one question before we separate. I have asked you so many already, that I fear I must seem impertinent; but time presses, and obliges me to dispense with ceremony. Have you decided yet, in any definite manner, upon the course of your future life? Have your affections become engaged? Are you betrothed to anybody?"

"No," I answered. "I have no future planned out; I do not care about anybody; and I am not engaged to be married."

"Quite, quite, free?" he asked, looking at me very earnestly. "Not even a wandering dream in your mind, or in your heart?"

"Nothing!" I replied, speaking sadly. "I have, of course, my hopes and my fears, and I build my castles in the air; but that is all! And you?"

"Nothing, nothing!" he answered. "Marriage, affection, have not hitherto entered into the programme of my

existence. Till now, all women have seemed to me like dolls!"

I did not answer him. Somehow I had expected this speech. I seemed to know that it must come before long.

"And when you hope, and fear, and build your castles, you sit here, where we are now sitting, looking like this, out over the woods and fields?"

"Yes; but always in the other summer-house, where we left my governess. I like it better than this one."

"Ah! And is not that the way I came this afternoon?"

He pointed to the road, which wound round through the park, towards that part of the estate which joined Lord Silchester's property.

"Yes, that's the way you must have come. It will be your shortest way back, too. You could walk it in less than half-an-hour."

"And may I not walk it again before I leave this place, very probably for ever? Some warm evening, perhaps, when my friend George is sitting, after dinner, with his old father? If I were then to wander out and find myself here, and then to leap over that wall, as I did just now, would you be sitting in your arbour, building your castles, and should I see you alone, where we could converse without interruption?"

I felt no thrill of emotion as the Prince uttered these words. I perceived what was unusual, romantic, sensational, in the situation, but I was mistress of myself in every fibre as I answered—

"Why should you come to me then, when you could come by daylight? What would anybody think who saw you coming as if by stealth?"

"They would not see me—nobody but you; or, if they did, they would think merely that I had dined here, and was sitting with you, after dinner, in your garden. To-day is Wednesday. I came but for one week, and am leaving for London on Monday morning. Tell me that

on Friday evening, at a little before ten o'clock, you will be there—where we left your duenna?"

"No, no, no!" I exclaimed, rising. "What can have made you think that I would do this? Do not come, I implore you! I shall not be there!"

"You will be there," he said quietly, meeting my eyes, for one moment, with a look which seemed half a supplication and half a command. "You will know that with me you will be as safe as with your father or your cousin, and you will come!"

When I returned to Miss Warden I felt weary and exhausted, as though with some kind of moral conflict. I had been victorious for the moment, but I had lost strength in the encounter. I was agitated and disturbed, too, at the thought that the Prince might persist in his intention.

As we entered the old summer-house, I saw that he seemed to be taking particular note of the locality.

Close to where Miss Warden was sitting at work, a word was picked out, upon the ground, in white pebbles.

It was "*Venture*," the name of a favourite dog belonging once to my mother—a water-spaniel, I had been told—which had been given to her by Mr. Collingwood, and so called because of its daring and intrepid disposition.

It had died but a short time before its mistress, and had been buried here. I explained this to Prince Crecszoleski before we repaired to the house.

"*Venture!*" he repeated, looking into my eyes again, with the same expression of commanding supplication that I had observed in them before.

Miss Warden fancied, no doubt, that he merely wanted to arrive at the correct pronunciation of the dead spaniel's name, but I felt sure that he was alluding to his project for Friday night.

CHAPTER IX.

I NEED hardly say that Prince Crecszoleski's distinguished manners and appearance had made a most favourable impression upon Miss Warden.

We were all made of the same clay, of course (she remarked), and Princes were mortal, like everybody else, and we were told in Scripture that we were not to put our trust in them; but still, she had observed, over and over again, whenever she had found herself in the society of really great personages, that there was something different about them, and, certainly, altogether superior. It was easy to see that our visitor, for instance, was utterly unlike anybody else.

I suggested that perhaps this may have proceeded from the fact that he was a Pole. She maintained, on the contrary, that it was solely because he was a Prince. Only one circumstance seemed to have disturbed and perplexed her a little. Whilst she was showing the Prince over the picture-gallery, previous to his departure (when, wishing my reply to his suggestion to be taken as final, I had not accompanied her), it had transpired, in the course of conversation, that Mr. Collingwood had not, after all, gone up to his appointment at the Foreign Office. His guest, indeed, was not aware that he had had any such intention. He had walked with him the greater part of the way to Northover, in order that he might not go wrong, and then,—he had simply turned back, and gone home again!

Here, according to Miss Warden, was a great mystery, and a total upsetting of all her previous theories. Why had Mr. Collingwood pretended that he was going up to London when he had had no intention of the kind? Why had he not accompanied the Prince upon his visit, particularly when he had seemed to be so anxious that I should

not receive him alone? All this was most incomprehensible!

"Perhaps," I said, amused at her readiness to attach importance to trifles, "Mr. Collingwood may be the man of double character!"

Considering the manner in which I had been educated—my hankering after excitement and romance—my craving for sympathy—my longing to make the entire happiness of some one other human being, and, by so doing, to ensure my own—my frame of mind, at this critical time, was almost a surprise to myself. I was beset by none of those rash impulses which are so often the dangerous accompaniments of youth. My most disturbing thoughts, just at first, were occasioned by the idea that the Prince should be at the trouble of walking all this way, immediately after his dinner, for nothing. I felt that he would probably adhere to his intention at all hazards, and I realised that, in spite of myself, I should be certain to feel very restless, and responsible, once I knew that he was waiting for me, close by, in the old summer-house. I should be sitting comfortably in the drawing-room, meanwhile (I thought), seeming to be placidly reading my book, or demurely working at my embroidery, whilst the clock went ticking on and on, past the appointed hour. The centre window, as was usual upon summer evenings, would have been left wide open, and to step out into the garden, and walk as far as the terrace, would be but the affair of a few moments. Often and often, upon warm nights, I had done this before! Miss Warden, who rarely went out of doors after dinner, would see nothing odd in this proceeding. It might seem rather cruel to the Prince, no doubt, not to come out, and say a few kind words to him, when I could manage it so easily, but I had said decidedly that I would not be there, and I would adhere to my word! . . .

If he had only said to me, "I love you; come to me,

because I cannot bear to leave you without a tender word of farewell!" I might, perhaps, have decided differently, seeing that it would have seemed so good to be loved! But, although from his manner I had certainly been led to suppose that I had aroused in him sentiments of interest or curiosity, he had said nothing to me of this kind. It was too soon, perhaps, for him to make me a declaration of affection; but then, surely, it was too soon, also, for me to agree to an assignation with him in the garden!

No! He had asked me to meet him (I said to myself) merely to test the strength of his mesmeric powers—to try some sort of cold-blooded experiment upon me! "You will know that with me you will be as safe as with your father or with your cousin," he had said. This was to show me that there would be no question of anything tender or sentimental. "I will prove to her that I possess a power over her" (he had probably said to himself). "She shall see that I can compel her to come to me, at any hour, and at any place I may appoint." His *heart* had had nothing whatever to do with his proposal. It was merely a question of *will*, and I was certainly not going to commit an indiscreet act merely for the privilege of being mesmerised, or biologised, or subjected to some manner of mental vivisection!

This is as correct a description as I am able to give, now, of the state of my feelings during the greater part of the night which followed upon the Prince's visit.

Towards morning, however, I fell into a troubled sleep, and dreamed a vague, incoherent, miserable kind of dream. I fancied that the Prince was, for some reason, in terrible agitation and distress of mind. At first we seemed to be in a large, empty, rambling sort of house, larger than any house I had ever beheld—cold, damp, and deserted-looking, with carpetless floors, and walls which, between the folds of some faded tapestry, displayed the rough-hewn

divisions in the masonry. I felt the cold and dreariness of the place chill me to the very marrow of my bones. The Prince was wandering from room to room, seeking for me, and calling me by my name; but, although I could see him perfectly from the place where I stood, I felt paralysed, and found it impossible to respond to his call. Then the whole scene changed, but the Prince was still there—this time nearly up to his neck in black turbid water, which, as it dripped from his hands, seemed to take the colour of blood. On his face was a look of horror and supplication. I was standing upon some stone steps, a little way above him, and he kept on holding out his hands to me as if entreating me to come to his rescue; but I again seemed to be utterly incapable of moving hand or foot in his service.

When I awoke I felt prostrated, both in mind and body. I was conscious, for the first time, that I possessed a nervous system, and that it seemed to be shattered. My feelings towards Prince Crecszoleski had undergone a decided change. I felt no longer so anxious to oppose his will. My dream appeared to have made me much more intimate with him, and I seemed to understand that, from some inexplicable cause, he was in bitter need of my help. A feeling of intense compassion invaded my whole being. It did not make me fancy that I was in love with him exactly, but it drove from my heart the notion that he was an alien and a stranger—to be mistrusted, perhaps, and feared a little as well. I felt more, now, as if I stood in some kind of responsible position with regard to a persecuted and defenceless being, whose sufferings *I* alone should be enabled to soothe.

I think that, at this period of my life, in spite of an unquestioning faith which rendered me perfectly at rest upon the subject of Orthodox Belief, I was, perhaps, superstitious rather than religious, attaching a great deal of secret importance to signs and omens, and never doubt-

ing but that, in any special emergency, there would be some sort of providential interposition upon my behalf, if only I could be inspired to read the message aright.

Seeing, therefore, that I had become so weakened in my endeavour to oppose what seemed, now, more like the working out of a predestined plan than the mere caprice of an individual;—seeing, also, that it was Thursday morning, and that, if I meant to acquaint the Prince with any change in my decision, I ought to get my letter ready by half-past seven that very evening, in order that he might receive it by the first post on Friday;—I made up my mind that I would be guided entirely by what the day brought forth in the way of inclining or opposing influences. That I would carefully observe and analyse—that is to say, every circumstance, however trivial—which might occur between the early morning and the evening post, and be guided, in my subsequent conduct, by the direction in which these circumstances should seem to tend, independently of all personal inclination or objection.

I had scarcely arrived at this resolution when a letter was put into my hand.

"Ah! thank heaven!" I said to myself, after I had read its contents. "All has been decided for me. I need struggle and do battle no more!"

The letter consisted of a few lines from old Matthews, the butler, who had gone with my father to London some weeks ago. Sir Harry had not been very well; his doctor advised a change, and he was returning to Northover that very afternoon by the three-twenty express from town. Would I send the brougham to the station to meet him?

This intelligence, to my mind, entirely disposed of the Prince's romantic visit, and I must confess that I experienced a sense of intense relief in consequence.

My father's habit of wandering about at odd hours, his dislike and mistrust of strangers, would make it impos-

sible for me to accede, now, to the Prince's request, even if I had felt inclined to do so. With Sir Harry, too, would arrive by this same three-twenty express, one "Nero"—to wit, a formidable-looking dun mastiff, ferocious as his imperial namesake of old time—whose particular vocation was to prowl about the garden in the evening, with the object of alarming trespassers. The Prince could not think me heartless, or insensible, for not wishing him to be mauled by this terrible animal! My spirits rose with the consciousness that my responsibility in the matter had ended.

Miss Warden, to whom master and dog were alike alarming, seemed not a little surprised at the satisfaction I displayed at the news of their return. Notwithstanding her tried affection, however, I dared not confide to her my reasons, fearing lest she should endeavour, perhaps, to influence me, when I desired that Fate, and Fate alone, should be my guide.

As I was sitting towards mid-day in the old summer-house, which in spite of myself I could not help regarding now with sentiments of romantic interest, a servant came out to me with a telegram from my father's London physician. It ran thus:—

"Sir Harry seriously unwell. Unable to travel. At his request have telegraphed to Colonel Davenant. Will write."

Revulsion of feeling! Over-setting of previous determination! Doubt, uncertainty, vacillation, to be my portion once more! . . .

Miss Warden, who had followed the footman in order to ascertain what the telegram was about, was evidently relieved at learning its purport.

I silently realised that, if I intended still to be guided by circumstances, the Prince had certainly scored a point.

But no! "Stay, James!" I called out to the retreat-

ing footman. "Ask the messenger to wait; I shall have an answer to send back! 'Seriously unwell!'" I repeated, turning to Miss Warden. "'Telegraphed to Colonel Davenant'?" How much that was ominous might lurk in these few words? My poor unhappy father!—(I thought, the tears coming into my eyes)—irritable, unreasonable, utterly wanting in all dignity and self-control; but still much more his own enemy than he was anybody else's; and over and above everything, in spite of all his shortcomings, still my only remaining parent! What if I should never behold him again? Had I been dutiful and affectionate enough to him? I asked myself reproachfully. As his daughter—the only child of the woman he had once so tenderly loved—ought I not to have penetrated, by force, the reserve which I had allowed to grow up between us, and conquered, by the sheer strength of my devotion, a way to his suffering heart?

I would go to him now, at any rate; on this I was determined! I would telegraph to this effect immediately, await a reply, and then start off to London by an afternoon train!

I informed Miss Warden of my decision, and that I should take Mason with me, who would be able to make herself useful as a nurse, after which I wrote and despatched my message.

The voice of Prince Crecszoleski, calling out to me through the echoing rooms of the deserted mansion of my dream, seemed to grow fainter and fainter, the dark blood-stained waters to rise, higher and higher, round his struggling form! For one moment, a sense as of his bitter need of me, oppressed me to such an extent that I was upon the point of recalling my message. Then I experienced a feeling of relief, of thankfulness, and of soothed and satisfied conscience.

I went upstairs to my room and informed Mason of

my determination to go to London. She heartily approved of it, and commenced getting together the wearing apparel that I should require during my stay.

At about half-past two came my father's reply to my telegram. I tore open the brown envelope with trembling fingers and read these words:—

"Do not require you. Unnecessary to come. You will only be in the way."

The luminous sea-green eyes seemed to smile now; the finely-cut lips to curl scornfully, whilst the soft low voice murmured:

"You thought to escape me! But no! I said that you would do as I desired, and you will be there!"

I was deeply wounded at my father's message. All the dormant yearnings of affection which, awakened by apprehensions as to his possible danger, had fluttered forth from my heart upon eager wings, seemed to have been driven back crushed and humiliated.

He "did not require" me; it was "unnecessary" for me to go, for I should "only be in the way!"

The advantage, if such it could be called, was now upon the side of the Prince; but I was averse to letting matters rest thus. I would go and seek for some fuller revelation. My father had failed me in the hour of my need. I would go and ask counsel of my mother, kneeling by her quiet grave in the green churchyard, and accept as final the impressions which came to me at that hallowed spot.

CHAPTER X.

I WENT, forthwith, into the garden, and gathered a bunch of the sweetest flowers I could find; and then, passing

through a gate which led across the deer-park, I came to the little Norman church, near to which my mother was sleeping.

She had not been laid in the family vault of the Davenants, amongst my father's departed kinsfolk, and I did not regret this now, since I should not have been able to go and commune with her in that gloomy place. Her grave was green and daisy-starred, as I should wish my own to be, if I could have the choosing of it, in a remote corner of the old church-yard, some way from all the more important monuments. Probably she may have expressed a desire to be buried in this quiet spot. No stone, or record, of any kind, had been set above her, and I should never have recognised her grave if I had not had it pointed out to me, long ago, by some of the old servants. Two stakes of hazel rose at the head and foot of the grassy mound, to mark out the space which was not to be encroached upon by the newer dead; but, beyond this, there was neither name nor sign to tell who was "the dreamer that now slept." Some day, no doubt, Sir Harry intended to erect a fitting monument to the memory of the wife he had loved so well; but he was not, now, in a mood favourable to the carrying out of projects, and probably nobody liked to remind him of so painful a subject.

There were no more graves beyond my mother's, her narrow bed being upon the extreme edge of one portion of the burying-ground, only shut off from a sweet unconsecrated hayfield—which a little while before had been waving with meadow flowers and fluttering with butterflies—by a low hawthorn hedge and a grey wooden paling.

It was to this side of her grave that I betook me now. I placed my tribute of flowers upon the grassy mound, and then, covering my eyes with my hands, I knelt down and strove to commune with, and appeal to, the gentle

spirit that had departed for ever from the earth. I possess the power of summoning up before me the faces of those who are dead, or absent, till I can see them as plainly as I can see my own face in a mirror. My mother's image had not faded in the least from my memory, and I could recall it quite distinctly, as I had seen her for the last time, in her white night-dress, with her dark hanging hair and her sweet girlish face looking anxious and startled.

As I knelt thus by the side of her grave, transported, in imagination, to the days of my childhood, and utterly oblivious, for the moment, to my actual surroundings, a sudden impression, uninvited by either previous suspicion or conjecture, took possession of my mind. An inward voice seemed to inquire of me, now, for the first time, whether I could make sure, after all, that my father had been so devotedly attached to my mother? Whether, on the contrary, his behaviour since her death was not more like what might have been occasioned by the prickings of a tardily-awakened remorse, or by some inexplicable feeling of vindictive resentment, than by the grief which must follow upon the loss of an earthly treasure?

Why had my father treated me with such coldness and neglect ever since he had been left a widower? Why did everything connected in any way with my mother's memory, her friends, her room, her portraits, become suddenly so unendurable to him? And why was she resting, now, in this obscure and nameless grave, with nothing to distinguish it from those of the peasant-folk—elbowing her hard by—save those two hazel-stakes, set there as though in anticipation that a vampire might rise from that cold and inanimate breast? The most generous manner of criticising the actions of another is, surely, by endeavouring—with all due allowance for exceptional circumstance or individual impulse—to put one's self in that other one's place; and I began to speculate, now, as to

how I should have behaved had I found myself in the position of a widower with one child, who had been devotedly attached to his departed wife.

It occurred to me that, had I been Sir Harry Davenant, a rich man, with all the resources of Art at my disposal, and had I found myself thus bereaved, in the afternoon of life, when I had no inclination to form new ties, I should, probably, as soon as the first agony of my grief had subsided, have set about raising some beautiful tomb or mausoleum, wherein all that remained of my beloved might be worthily enshrined. I felt convinced that no project would be of greater interest to me than the planning and devising of this memorial, and that one of the most satisfying of my remaining consolations would be derived from watching its gradual progress towards completion. Then, before this, or after it, according to my taste and temperament, I should have the health and education of my child to superintend—the child that was *her* child as well as my own—reproducing (most likely) in form, feature, or voice, something of the beloved being who had gone from me for ever; and then, too, I might strive to aid and comfort any poor desolate people who came in my way, and who were afflicted as I was.

Looked at from this point of view, my father's conduct appeared to me to have been both unfeeling and inconsistent—as regarded his wife's memory, his wife's child, his wife's final resting-place. As I glanced towards the humble graves that lay around me, I saw that there was scarcely one of them, of recent date, upon which some care in the form of growing flowers, or gathered nosegay, had not been lavished. A tufted cypress intervened between my mother's grave and that of the nearest of her rustic neighbours, a village carpenter, as I learnt from the inscription upon the wooden headpiece:—a crockery mug, full of double daisies and wallflowers, bedecked his grassy bed, and told of the ministration of tender hands;

but upon *her* grave no sign or symbol of affection from the husband who had been supposed to love her so well in life! When I and my flowers had faded and passed away, who would ever turn aside to drop a tear upon this nameless and forsaken spot?

As I meditated thus, I was startled at hearing the sound of a long-drawn sigh, proceeding from close to where I was kneeling; and, peeping between the branches of the tufted cypress, I perceived the figure of a woman, crouched down at the further side of the poor carpenter's grave. She had covered her face with her hands, and seemed to be silently weeping. When she removed them I saw that she was a hard-featured daughter of toil—looking like a harvester, or farm-servant—neither young nor comely, but with a faithful, earnest face, idealised now by the refining influence of sorrow.

I rose from my knees, so that she might know that she was not alone. It was evident that she had arrived after me at the churchyard, and had not perceived me till now. She seemed to be confused at my presence.

"Good afternoon," I said, thinking to put her more at her ease.

"Good afternoon, miss," she repeated, wiping her eyes with her coarse linen apron. "You've got somebody lying here, too?" she inquired of me by-and-by.

"Yes, my mother;" and I pointed to the nameless grave. "She is next to—your husband perhaps?" . . .

"No, miss," she answered sadly, "we didn't never go to church together,—me and him,—but was just as fond and true as if we had. But one day he asked me to do something that I said I would see him lying here dead before I'd agree to, and we didn't part friendly. And, next day, I heard that he'd fallen off a ladder and was taken to his account; and so I couldn't never make it up with him again. And now, miss, that he's dead and gone, there isn't any mortal thing that I wouldn't be ready to

do for him if he was to ask me; and so, whenever I can find time to run over from my situation, I come here and tell him this, and it seems to make me feel much easier; and though he can't ever ask me for anything no more, it makes me fancy that he knows just how it all happened! It's a long while ago now, miss; but it seems all quite fresh in my mind!"

We passed out of the churchyard together, and along the short bit of highway road which lay between us and the park. Her simple ungrammatical words, uttered with the rough "burr" peculiar to my native shire, had impressed me deeply.

"Good day, miss," she said, as I turned in at the wicket-gate which led into Northover Park,—"It do seem sad to leave them lying there all by themselves!" and so we separated.

The years that have intervened since this day and the time at which I am writing, have not been so many but that I can recall distinctly every one of the impressions it left with me, and trace their influence upon my future actions. Foremost amongst these, I remember, as I walked home through the feathery bracken, was the notion that, on account of my father's unfortunate condition, I might be looked upon for the rest of my days as a creature upon whom some sort of hereditary curse had descended. I wondered, now, whether this state of mental degeneracy might not have set in, in some form, previous to my mother's death, when I had been too young to observe it; and whether, in consequence, she might not have been less happy with him, perhaps, than had been generally supposed? I realised to-day, more clearly than I had ever done before, that my father regarded me with feelings of absolute indifference—if not of positive dislike—and that, but for Mason and Miss Warden, the world would have been singularly empty for me of all sympathy and love. I was within sight,

now, of the grey garden terrace, with its statues and urns standing out in bold relief against the dark yew hedge at the back; and I could see, in fancy, the lithe active figure of Prince Crecszolcski vaulting lightly over the low balustrade. Was I so rich (I asked myself) in earthly friendship, or affection, that I could afford to despise and cast from me either the one or the other? Ought I not, on the contrary, to feel touched at, and grateful for, the faintest show of kindly interest? And supposing (only "*supposing*") any such interest on the part of the Prince should ever ripen into anything deeper and more permanent, would it not be some sort of gratification to my offended vanity to be able to prove to my cousin Courtenay—(Courtenay, who was admitted now, as though he had been a son, to the bedside of my father, whilst I, his own daughter, would "only be in the way!") —that, without troubling my mind in the least about him or his matrimonial projects, I had actually succeeded, before I was twenty years old, in making the conquest of this handsome and distinguished stranger?

But then the Prince had said nothing whatever about either love or marriage in connection with myself.

"Marriage, affection, have not hitherto entered into the programme of my existence" (he had said to me in the garden); "till now, all women have seemed to me like dolls."

Ah! but the "*hitherto*," and the "*till now*"? Were not these words intended to have a special significance, and might it not be in order to enlarge upon them more fully that he had begged me to grant him an interview in the old summer-house? Were I to keep to my original intention, and follow the impulses evoked by the impressions of the day, the last point had certainly been gained by the Prince. The words of the poor woman at the grave of the carpenter seemed to warn me that one might be too obdurate, as well as too impressionable, and

that it was possible, when it was too late, to suffer for the one as severely as for the other; and then, over and above everything, I was imbued with the strange conviction, that my help was necessary to rescue and comfort a troubled and afflicted spirit.

I found Miss Warden with the tea-things before her, awaiting me in the drawing-room. She wondered where I could have been all this long time; the tea must have become quite cold! I told her that I was neither hungry nor thirsty. As I was going upstairs to my room, she exclaimed, suddenly—

"What a blessing it is, Helen, to think that your friend is a real Prince, for good and all; that he won't turn out, as foreign princes so constantly do, to be a waiter, or a courier, or an escaped forger! I have quite lost the feeling that there is anything about him in the least like Eugene Aram. He shook hands—of this I took particular notice—with his right hand; and Mr. Collingwood said that he belonged to one of the most illustrious families in Poland, which is now very nearly extinct."

"He told me," I said, "that he had one only sister."

"Yes; and he possesses an enormous estate, too; with a house which is quite a palace, surrounded by forests crawling alive with wolves and wild boars. This, he informed me, he is very anxious to sell, if he possibly can —(his sister and he have agreed upon this between them, and there is a gentleman in treaty for it now);—after which his dream of happiness is to settle in England, with an English wife, and devote himself to philosophical (I think he said 'philosophical') studies."

"He said all this to you yesterday?"

"Yes; and he said it in such a very significant way whilst we were looking over the pictures. He seems very gentle and serious, and not at all proud. There's only one thing I don't quite like about him."

"And that is?"—I began, wishing to annex every random impression.

"I fear," Miss Warden answered, ominously, "that his constitution is anything but robust! There is a very curious light in his eyes, which goes, I have always noticed, with great delicacy, and he has such dark lines underneath them. I must find out, through the cards, whether he is destined to be very short-lived, because this is a most important consideration. Poor dear young man! I'm afraid he smokes too many of those nasty cigarettes, and drinks too much of that dreadful green tea."

My kind friend could scarcely have uttered these words at a more critical moment. Compassion, as I have already said (wherefore implanted in me for this total stranger I knew not), was, at this time, one of the feelings uppermost in my mind. Apart from this sentiment, and a sudden realising of my own desolate position, I was aware of no compelling impulse. Had I been conscious that I was a prey to any kind of alluring temptation, I might, perhaps, have summoned to my aid stronger powers of resistance.

As it was, I merely said to myself, with a recklessness begotten of heart-hunger and humiliation, mingling with compassion, and a little, perhaps, with a thirst after some sort of dramatic adventure—

"I am despised and rejected by the one whose duty it should be to love and cherish me. I have nobody to care for but my governess and my old nurse. My father is 'seriously unwell,' but he refuses to see me. He tells me that I shall be 'only in the way.' If he dies, I shall be at once turned out of house and home by my cousin Courtenay, whom I cannot bear. A rich and good-looking foreign Prince appears as if he could care for me. He has asked me to meet him to-night in the garden, and meet him I will, whatever may come of it in the future; and I will marry him, too, should he desire it, and elope with

him by a ladder of ropes! He is unhappy and lonely, and disappointed with his life. Like me, he is longing for sympathy and affection. And then, how romantic and unexpected is all this! A Prince, and a garden, and a moon! It is just like something one reads about in a book!"

By half-past seven I had written a letter to the Prince, with a brand-new quill pen, in my boldest and most flourishing hand. I felt that it would be unnecessary to say more than these few words:—

"To-morrow evening (Friday), at ten o'clock, I will be in the old summer-house, as you wished;" and I then added, lest he should fancy that I had been impelled by the power of his will, "I am coming of my own accord; this has nothing to do with mesmerism."

It was fortunate (I thought, as I directed the envelope) that—thanks to Mr. Collingwood—I knew the correct way of spelling the Prince's name!

I do not suppose that a man is often able to realise the various combining circumstances, utterly independent of all personal influence or persuasion, which may sometimes induce an inexperienced and impressionable woman to submit herself to the dictates of his will. Men and women appear to be guided, usually, by totally different instincts, and, to one another, their several aims and aspirations must nearly always seem like sealed books.

I wonder whether it is the same with the males and females of birds, beasts, and fishes, who appear—*to us*, at least—to understand each other so well?

CHAPTER XI.

No event occurred to make any change in my plans before Friday evening. I realised, however, as the day wore on,

that a change had taken place in myself. I was no longer nervous, excited, impelled — as it had seemed — by the voices of duty and compassion alike, to respond to Prince Crecszoleski's appeal. In this respect I had become totally indifferent. I would keep to the appointment because I had written to say that I would do so, that is, supposing it did not rain; but I had ceased to imagine that a suffering fellow-creature would derive any comfort from my resolve.

At about half-past nine o'clock I threw a light shawl over my shoulders—as I was wearing only a thin evening dress—and went out through the drawing-room window upon the moon-lit terrace, saying to Miss Warden that I meant to stroll about the garden till bed-time.

I know now—though I did not know it then—that I did not feel in the least as if I was about to keep an assignation with a lover. No faltering feet; no changing colour; no impetuous heart-beating! But I remember thinking, in a foolish, school-girlish, kind of way, that the "situation" at least, was romantic, and out of the common order, and that it could be scarcely possible —even in a novel—for the accessories of a love-scene to be more effectively grouped and disposed. I experienced, too, a certain satisfying sense as of a purpose—or rather of a penance—achieved; independent altogether of any personal emotion to be derived from it; just as the prisoner who has been helping to build the wall which shuts him away from the world; or the monk who has been engaged in the digging of his own grave, may feel some sort of conscientious satisfaction at the completion of his labour.

The night was lovely, and as I stood upon the garden-terrace, and gazed over the park, my whole being seemed to become inspired and spiritualised by the intense beauty of the scene. The moon, I thought to myself, was exactly what a moon ought to be. Full enough to bathe the far landscape in a vague, mysterious, radiance; and yet, not

one of those staring, bared-faced moons, whose rays are almost as indiscreet as those of the sun.

The great forest trees lay massed together amongst their shadows, and the wandering streamlet was glistening like burnished silver. The deer seemed all to have retired to their ferny couches, but a couple of hares were feeding together,—out in the open, by which I knew that—as yet, at least—no human footstep could be approaching.

It is difficult upon such occasions—even where falterings and heart-beatings are wanting—to compute with anything like accuracy the passing of minutes. I know not, therefore, how long I may have lingered in the full moonlight—a quarter of an hour, perhaps; or, it may be, not nearly so much—when I turned down the shady walk to the right, went into the old summer-house, and seated myself in one of the rustic chairs.

Over the low stone balustrade upon the opposite side of the narrow pathway, I could see the further woodlands shrouded in soft vapoury mist, and the patch of moonlit forest-glade in the midst of which the two hares were still feeding. I should know, by watching the behaviour of these hares, when the Prince was on his way towards me through the deer-park.

It seemed a long time before I saw them skurrying away, helter-skelter, into the adjacent covert, and longer still—considering the shortness of the distance—before I became aware of a muffled footfall upon the grass, and the quick breathing of a human being upon the other side of the terrace-walk. Then a male figure leapt over the balustrade and crossed the pathway.

I rose from my chair and went to the rustic porch.

It was not the Prince!

"Mr. Collingwood!" I exclaimed, starting back in amazement, as I recognised my god-father.

"Ah, Helen," he said, apologetically, rather than re-

proachfully, as he took both my hands in his, "I know, too well, that I'm not the person you expected! Don't think, however, that I came here to scold you. Sit down, my child, and let us talk it all over."

He drew me to the rustic chair from which I had just risen, and sat down upon another by my side.

I felt too bewildered, and too ashamed, to utter a word.

I despaired of being able to make him understand the subtle and mysterious influences which had combined together to drive me to this imprudent act, and felt that I would rather he should look upon me as indiscreet, and absurdly romantic, than that he should fancy that I sought to excuse myself by what would seem to him like a distortion of facts.

"You hear me, Helen?" he asked, leaning towards me, after we had remained for some seconds in silence. "You see, dear, that I am not angry with you? I came to advise you as a true friend."

He spoke very earnestly, and I perceived that he seemed to be much agitated.

"I am ashamed and surprised," I faltered, hanging my head. "Tell me, where is the Prince?"

"In London, at this moment. I expect him back again to-morrow. Perhaps you would like to know, before we speak of other things, how I come to be here in his place?"

I nodded assent, and he continued—

"I don't know whether he may have told you or not, but Hugo Crecszoleski has a sister, older than he is by at least ten years. Long ago, when I was at the Embassy in Paris, she was living in Paris too. I got to know her pretty well, and since then she occasionally writes to me. She is a clever, eccentric, fascinating woman, and was, at that time, very beautiful. She has obtained a good deal of influence over those with whom she has become intimate, and prides herself upon this faculty. To her brother her will seems to be law. She can make him,

apparently, do just what she pleases. Well, this lady arrived suddenly in London on Wednesday night, and wrote to inform me that as it was absolutely necessary she should consult with her brother at once upon very important business, she proposed running down here on Thursday morning and staying for a few days."

"And she is here now?" I interrupted, wondering what connection this lady could possibly have with my affairs.

"Indeed, no! I wrote to tell her that I could not possibly receive her. My father is very old and nervous, new arrivals disturb and upset him. She is a restless, excitable person, different, in this respect, from her brother. Upon receiving my letter, this morning, she telegraphed to Hugo to come up to London immediately, upon this same very important business."

"And he went up at once?"

"No; I saw, and was surprised to see, that, for once, he hesitated to obey her. He seemed much put out at her message, and sent one back to know whether to-morrow wouldn't suit her as well. Her answer was, that she must see him to-day, whereupon he started off by the next train."

The Prince's absence was thus satisfactorily explained, but I had yet to learn how Mr. Collingwood had become aware of his intended meeting with me.

By-and-by he went on, in a tone which still betrayed some emotion.

"I saw him off in the hall, and he drove away. When I turned to go back to my room a letter was lying upon the floor. It had no envelope, and I picked it up, thinking I must have dropped it myself. "Northover Park" was upon the writing-paper. Ah! Helen! You will never know what came into my heart as I read your words! What regrets, what hopes and fears, what dreams and memories, were awakened as I looked at your peculiar but beautiful handwriting! For one moment

my heart grew warm again with the delicious emotions of youth, and I half imagined that your letter must have been intended for myself!"

"For yourself?" I exclaimed in bewilderment. I was utterly at a loss to comprehend his words. By-and-by, however, a light seemed to break in on me.

"You were reminded, you mean, of something that once happened to yourself? Of somebody you once cared for?"

"Yes, the first, the last, real love of my life, will ever be associated in my mind with just such a moonlight meeting as this, to which I was summoned by just such a letter as yours. But enough of myself and my departed dreams! I am here to speak to you about yourself! Do you really imagine, Helen, that you are in love with this man?"

I knew not how to answer this question. I realised that, in his eyes, my conduct could only seem explicable by reason of some sudden and uncontrollable infatuation for his guest, which had had the effect of scattering my prudence to the four winds.

"I don't know," I faltered at length. "I cannot say as yet. It has all been so strange and so sudden."

"Well, dear, whether you care for him or not, you must let me say my say. I am not going to abuse him. I see, as well as you can, all that must make him attractive to a young creature in your lonely position. I believe him to be an amiable and chivalrous man, who can be trusted implicitly with a woman's honour. But to trust a man for an hour is a different thing to trusting him for a lifetime, and I must implore of you, my child, if this is nothing more than a mere girlish flirtation, to let it pass quietly out of your mind when the object of it departs, on Monday, from this place. Hugo Crecszoleski is a strange, incomprehensible being. He is not governed by any of the ordinary laws which control civilised man. He is a

mystic, an impressionist. He listens to, and obeys, voices that nobody else can hear. He will seem, perhaps, to be absorbed in some project. A mysterious message comes to him, the whole plan is abandoned, all interest in it ceases at once! He may care for you now, perhaps, or he may merely imagine that, for some occult reason, it is necessary to him to secure your love. Were he to marry you, he might be, for a time, the tenderest and most devoted of husbands; then, one of these extraordinary impressions might come to him, and he would reorganise the whole plan of his existence. You would be powerless to reason with him—tears, entreaties, would have no sort of effect—and were you to place yourself in open opposition to these hidden forces, I tremble to think of what the consequences might be. Consider, my child, whether it would be wise for a woman to confide her happiness to such a man?"

"You know nothing more against him than this?" I asked, my inveterate love for everything that was strange, and unconventional, causing me to be rather attracted than repelled by this aspect of the Prince's character.

"Nothing whatever; I don't even know that he's a member of a secret society, or plotting—like so many of his countrymen—to free his nation from the tyranny of Russia! His title is a genuine title; he belongs to one of the most ancient and illustrious families in Poland, where he possesses an extensive tract of country; and he seems to have an unlimited supply of cash. He must need it, too, for, to judge by the letters which are forwarded to him here, he pursues his unprofitable researches in every corner of the globe. Most of his countrymen, and countrywomen, that I have known, have had an insatiable craving for gambling. His sister possesses this failing, and Crecszoleski may have played a little, too, when the thing has come in his way; but he appears to be the slave of no passion. Believe me, Helen, he will

never be the slave of any woman, either—in the sense in which the term is generally understood; nor will the woman who marries him have gained even a reliable master. She who hopes for a friend, a lover, a protector, will find out, too late, that she has linked her existence with a shadow. Turn all this over in your mind, and pause, for God's sake, before you allow yourself to become involved with this strange being! Honestly, I believe that both he and his sister are a little mad,—not mad enough to be shut up; but too mad to rely upon for one's happiness: *toqués*, as they say over in France."

"Everybody seems to be mad!" I exclaimed, petulantly. "I have no doubt that, to you, I seem mad myself!"

"No, dear," he answered, assuming a more comfortable tone; "I see exactly how all this came about. It all comes of the unnatural, solitary life you are leading down here. You ought to be taken out in London; to go to balls and parties; and mingle with young people of your own age. You ought to be married to some good, honest, sensible man, not to a poor, half-cracked dreamer of dreams; and then you would be as happy as possible!"

I felt somewhat aggrieved at this purely practical view of the case.

"Indeed," I said, "I shouldn't care for balls and parties, or to live amongst the London fogs! And, I assure you it isn't that I am so very anxious to be married. . ."

I broke off. The utter hopelessness of endeavouring to explain to another what I could not altogether explain to myself overcame me with despair, and blinding tears rushed to my eyes.

"I see, I see, my child," answered my godfather, cheerfully, "you don't care to be married, but you want somebody to love—somebody to whose happiness you are necessary. Your heart is unoccupied, and so you fancy that you are in love with the first man who crosses your path, and who happens to possess an attractive appearance.

But there is no need to be in a hurry. Things will all come right, believe me, if you only give yourself time. All your friends about here are anxious to help you. We all see the dangers and difficulties of your present position. I was speaking of this to your governess the other night. I, for one, however, have not yet given up all hope of another marriage for you—a marriage which your poor mother always spoke of, and which Sir Harry, when he conducted himself more like other people, used to look upon as very desirable. I believe that it might easily be brought about, if only you could be thrown together. I allude to your marriage with Courtenay Davenant."

"I hate the very name of Courtenay Davenant!" I exclaimed passionately,—glad of a scapegoat upon whom I could let loose some of my nervous irritation.

"The little Nelly that I used to play with in the old days seems to have grown into a very desperate and determined character," said Mr. Collingwood, smiling sadly. "I hardly think that you would hate him were you to meet him now, for he's one of the nicest fellows imaginable. He and I are capital friends, and if he were only in England, I would ask him down here, later on, for the shooting, and do everything in my power to bring you together."

"It would be no use," I answered, hardening my heart; "he objects to the marriage of first cousins, and so do I."

"Oh, that's all nonsense!" rejoined my godfather lightly. "If you and he could only get to know one another we should soon hear no more of such silly notions! But it is getting late, and I shall have to leave you. Promise me two things, Helen, before I go. First, that you will reflect well upon all I have said to you before you do anything decisive; and, secondly, that should you ever require the protection or advice of a friend, you will apply to me wherever I may happen to be." He again took my hands in his, drew me towards

him, and looked at me earnestly and appealingly. "I promise," I answered, impressed by the earnestness of his manner.

He covered my hands with kisses—despairing kisses as I should have fancied, if only he had been a younger man—and rose to go. I perceived that he was deeply affected; but could not explain the nature of his emotion.

As he went out of the summer-house he pulled some blossoms from the sprays of honeysuckle that clustered about the entrance, and pressed them to his lips.

"I shall keep these as a remembrance of your promise," he said—"of our meeting this evening, and of this lovely and hallowed spot! . . . Good night!"

CHAPTER XII.

I HOPED, afterwards, that Mr. Collingwood wholly understood that, by the words "I promise," I meant that I would indeed reflect upon his warning, and regard him ever as my true friend for having uttered it, reserving for myself, however, full liberty of action after fulfilling his wishes in these two respects.

Be this how it may, in less than a month from the time of this friendly warning, after much painful uncertainty and wavering of purpose, I yielded to what seemed to me like an irresistible pressure, proceeding, as it were, from every point of the compass, and was married privately to Hugo Crecszoleski in a London church.

It all came to pass after the following fashion:—The Prince called upon me at Northover upon his return from London. With Mr. Collingwood's words still ringing in

my ears, I listened in a somewhat critical spirit to his explanations, eagerly on the look out for any inaccuracies which might occur in his narrative. It corresponded, however, exactly with what I had already heard, and I was favourably impressed at perceiving how conscientiously precise this man of mysteries had been in his account of all that had occurred.

He was vexed beyond measure, he said, at his sister's unexpected summons. He had endeavoured, at first, to procure a delay of twelve hours, and had telegraphed to her to this effect. Her reply was that she must see him immediately, and he responded at once to what he now regarded as the voice of Destiny.

"When an obstacle to any cherished project arises in your path," he said, "it is wise to commence by battling with it. When, however, it re-appears, in spite of opposition, you become aware that a force is in motion which it is beyond your power to resist, that a voice is speaking which must utter the last word. To the dictates of what other mentor are we to listen?"

He spoke with so much apparent fervour of conviction that I was afraid he would have thought me old-fashioned and common-place, if I had ventured to say anything about prayer or the dictates of conscience!

His interview with his sister, he next informed me, had been productive of very satisfactory results.

She had desired to consult him with regard to the sale of his Polish estates—a project they had both contemplated for years. The Prince was the last male representative of his family. His sister was a widow and childless. She had hitherto preferred wandering from place to place to remaining in a fixed home; and if she ever made up her mind to settle permanently it would probably be in Paris, Petersburg, Vienna—some large city, for she held the country in utter abomination. They had decided between them, therefore, that if only a purchaser could be found

it would be to their mutual advantage to dispose of the property.

"I am deeply interested," the Prince had proceeded to explain, "in researches which it is very difficult for me to pursue in such an out-of-the-way place. I should never reside there, in consequence. I have gone there, perhaps, once or twice, for the sake of the hunting, in the last five or six years, but this is all. Were I to marry, I could never condemn my wife to bury herself in such a desolate place—she would object to it as much as did my sister. I have memories about it, it is true, but they are not all pleasant ones, and memories may be made wherever we like! The money that should come to me by this sale would enable me greatly to extend the field of my philosophical and psychical investigations, and I should be able, also, to purchase an English estate, and thus make my principal home in the centre of an enlightened civilisation."

But a rambling, medieval castle—partly ruinous, and wholly out of repair, although some portions of the surrounding estate were extremely profitable, and might, with attention, be made to produce far more than they did at present—did not appear, to many people, evidently, to be a very desirable possession, and for years, now, the Prince and his sister had almost despaired of finding a purchaser.

"*Mais tout vient à qui sait attendre*," the Prince had gone on to say. "My sister, when in Paris the other day, falls in, in the most curious manner in the world, with an English gentleman, engaged in commerce—a Mr. Marks, or Mark—who, quite by accident, meeting my sister in the public reading-room of an hotel, addresses her in a few polite phrases. My sister replies; they talk upon various subjects. The conversation, by one of those remarkable coincidences which we are, as yet, powerless to explain, turns upon the purchase of landed estates, and it

then transpires that Mr. Marks—an enthusiastic lover of the chase, especially of that of wolves and wild boar—has long desired to purchase a property in Poland precisely of the description of that which we have for long been so anxious to sell! He is English—a cultivated, obliging person—speaking fluently both Polish and German. Money is no object to him whatever; the preliminaries of the bargain are, then and there, arranged by my sister, subject, of course, to my approval. I could scarcely have hoped for such a remarkable stroke of good fortune!"

Mr. Marks, it appeared, had made only one stipulation —a very reasonable one, as Prince Crecszoleski readily admitted. He desired to rent the castle for the period of one year, before finally concluding the purchase, which was to depend upon whether the climate suited him, and whether the hunting answered his expectations.

The Prince's sister, "Delphine," as he called her, came over to London as soon as the negotiations had proceeded thus far, but she was only able to remain in England for a few days, and hence her anxiety to consult with her brother at once.

Their interview passed off very satisfactorily. Mr. Marks was to take up his abode at the castle as soon as possible. He demanded no repairs, desiring that the place should be left just as it was, and agreed to pay an excellent rent. So impatient was he to conclude the arrangement, indeed, and so sanguine did he seem about it, that he scarcely glanced at the photograph of the castle which Delphine had procured for his inspection. It was as though the whole transaction had been to him like the realisation of a dream. His enthusiasm knew no bounds. If only he continued in the same mind the Prince had no doubt but that the purchase would be concluded as soon as the year had expired. And then, after he had informed me of all these details, Hugo Crecszoleski asked me if I would become his wife.

"You need not now be exiled," he said, "to these barbaric regions! We can chose our new home. It shall spring up wheresoever you may command. With you at my side, I feel that it may be possible for me to achieve great things. A wife like you, with a strong, magnificent individuality, is what I have hitherto needed to complete my nature."

I was imbued with the consciousness that, sooner or later, for some mysterious reason, this marriage must take place, and that nothing in heaven or earth, or in the waters under the earth, would be able to prevent it; but I felt no awakening of a warmer sympathy towards the man who was destined to become my husband.

I remarked, too, that, whilst addressing me kindly and respectfully, the Prince made no protestations of violent affection, in the sincerity of which, considering the shortness of our acquaintance, I might have found it difficult to believe; nor did he appear to require any such assurances upon my part.

This forbearance seemed to make my own course a thousand times easier, and I thanked him sincerely, in my heart, for having made no attempt to work upon my feelings.

I discussed the subject of our marriage with him reasonably, calmly, dispassionately — the unaccountable sense, as of predestination, which I have already described, causing my words to seem, all the while, like a mockery to myself.

I told him that I did not consider that we had known each other long enough to marry; that my father was an irritable invalid, who had lately become worse, so that, just at present, I should not dare to speak to him upon the subject of any engagement that I might form. Then, thinking of what Mr. Collingwood had said about linking myself to a shadow, I asked him whether he was not of

too roving and visionary a disposition to care for the calm delights of home life, and whether a wife could ever hope to have any real part in the existence of one who was so absorbed in mystic lore, and who acted in obedience to laws which she would probably never be able to understand?

To these questions he only answered, smiling quietly, and not at all ill-naturedly—

"Ah! so my good friend George has been traducing me to you during my absence, and this is all he can tell you to my disadvantage! George, as you must have perceived, is pre-eminently a materialist—'a sensualist,' I may almost add. He has no sympathy, whatever, with the spiritual aspects of life. These things are purely constitutional, and we are not responsible for them. 'Let us eat, drink, and be merry—everything else is nothing!' expresses his creed to the letter. You will have observed this, as you know him well, and also, that the best of everything must always be for himself; nobody else must approach it until it has ceased to please him—then it may go—anybody may take it who likes! He thrusts from him, persistently, everything that, by awakening the nobler emotions, might interfere with his personal complacency. His highest aim in life is to be perpetually comfortable!"

I had remarked, certainly, in Mr. Collingwood's conversation, a decided vein of practical materialism. I looked upon it as his only fault, and excused it on the ground of his having lived so much abroad, in flippant, frivolous society, where pleasure was sought after rather than happiness, and where people, and things, were valued less for their intrinsic worth than for the amusement which could be derived from them at the moment. His genial, sanguine disposition, led him, no doubt, to shrink from, and ignore, much that was gloomy, disagreeable, and irremediable; but this characteristic rendered him,

probably, all the more anxious to protect others from what he dreaded himself; and I could not doubt, after my interview with him in the summer-house, that he was possessed, at any rate, of a kind and affectionate heart. I realised, however, that he might possibly feel but little sympathy for the tenets of an ascetic mysticism.

With the view of overcoming my other objections, the Prince suggested that I should arrange to stay with my father in London. Had Mr. Marks desired any repairs, or alterations, at the ancestral *château*, he would have felt bound to superintend them himself, which would have obliged him to leave England at once. As it was, however, the accommodating behaviour of his tenant had relieved him of all further trouble, and as his sister had consented to arrange the terms of the lease with Mr. Marks, in Paris, he was now entirely at my disposal. My father, being an invalid, would be unlikely, he said, to interfere with my movements. That "amiable lady," my "duenna," might be taken into our confidence. If permitted to do so, he should esteem it a privilege to escort us over the sights of London. We might visit the picture-galleries, the theatres, and attend, with him, some of the lectures and *séances* which treated of those spiritual matters in which he was so profoundly interested. In this way, he said, we should soon become better acquainted, and if, after this fuller acquaintance, I found that he was not personally disagreeable to me, we might arrange to be married at once. Supposing that my father's critical condition made me still unwilling to speak to him upon the subject, or supposing that, because the Prince was a foreigner, objections and difficulties were raised which might turn to my eventual disadvantage, it would be as well, perhaps, to take the law into our own hands, and to be married privately. In London this could very easily be managed, and we could afterwards wait, either until Sir Harry was in a less precarious

state of health, or until I attained my majority, before we publicly announced our marriage to the world. All this would be for me to consider.

I promised that I would turn the matter over in my mind, though I could hold out but little hope of being able to go up to London—my father having just refused my request to be allowed to attend upon him during his illness.

Prince Crecszoleski then asked me, for the second time, whether I had had any previous attachment, and again I replied in the negative.

"Then we shall be married," he said, quietly; and after he had given me his London address, and raised my hand respectfully to his lips, he forthwith took his departure.

CHAPTER XIII.

As soon as the Prince had quitted our neighbourhood, "the plot" (to use Miss Warden's absurd expression), began to "thicken" rapidly. The first sign of this took the form of a letter from Colonel Davenant to myself, which arrived in the course of a few days, and which ran as follows:—

"DEAR MISS DAVENANT,

"It is so long since we met, that I dare hardly hope you will still remember my existence. I venture to recall myself to your memory, however, thinking that you may like to hear the last news of Sir Harry. I have just returned from sitting with him now, and am glad to be able to give you a favourable report.

"I interviewed the doctor, who says that, with perfect quiet and good nursing, he may very soon be himself again, and that the unfavourable symptoms may disappear. My uncle was kind enough to ask me to go down to Northover, next month, for some partridge-shooting, or later on, in October. I have just been invited to stay at Lord Silchester's on the 5th September, and would propose to come on from there to Northover about the 8th or 9th, if it would be convenient to you to receive me at that time. I go down to Cowes this afternoon, and, as I propose yachting with a friend after to-morrow, and may not be sure of receiving my letters, it would be very kind of you if you would let me have an answer by telegram to the Royal Yacht Squadron, Cowes, Isle of Wight.

"Looking forward to the pleasure of seeing you again soon,

"Believe me to be,

"Yours very sincerely,

"COURTENAY DAVENANT."

To anybody but to me, this would surely have seemed to be a very natural and inoffensive letter for a young man to have written to his female cousin, erring, if it erred at all, rather on the side of unnecessary formality, considering the relationship, than on that of officiousness or impertinence. But, just at this time, Courtenay Davenant could do nothing right in my eyes. I remember, now, that, as I read, I was inclined to take almost every word amiss.

"How soon he rushed over from abroad when he heard that Sir Harry had been taken ill!" I thought to myself. "He is like a cormorant, coming after the loaves and fishes! Does he suppose that, because I am not in London, I hold no communication whatever with my father's household and that he is doing me a great

favour in writing to me about his health? 'I interviewed the doctor!' . . . . To find out, of course, if his uncle was in any real danger, and how long it was likely to be before he might expect to succeed him, in order that he might make his plans accordingly! And then, as he chanced to be now in England, it had occurred to him, probably, that there would be no harm, after all, in just running down to Northover and taking a glance at the cousin whose existence he had seemed to ignore for so long; and hence this plausible, hypocritical letter. 'Looking forward to the pleasure' of seeing me soon, and so on! . . . If, after I, too, had been 'interviewed,' my manner and appearance happened to please his critical eye, then, who could say what great honour might not be reserved for me! If not, there would be no harm done—to *himself*, at any rate!

"He would be able to look over the house and property that might so soon become his own, and he would have done his country cousin a kindness by condescending to visit her at all! But it is too late! it is too late!" I thought, as with a sense of triumph. "I do not care, now, whether you come and see me or not! I have done for ever with the family marriage-project!"

Nevertheless, I suppose I should have replied to his letter by begging him to do as he proposed about coming to Northover, were it not that, immediately after my receipt of it, events began shaping themselves hurriedly according to the wishes of Prince Crecszoleski.

My father became rapidly worse; he was attacked with paralysis, and remained for some days in an unconscious state. His doctor telegraphed for me at once, and in little more than a week from the time of the Prince's departure, Miss Warden, Mason, and I, found ourselves established in London, at an hotel in the vicinity of Berkeley Square.

In the hurry of my departure from home, I entirely forgot all about my cousin and his letter. Miss Warden

reminded me of it, however, when we were on our way to the station, and that it had required an immediate answer. We were late for our train, so I had only time to leave orders with the footman that he was to telegraph to Colonel Davenant in my name, and inform him that, as I had been suddenly summoned to London, I should not be at Northover at the time of his proposed visit. Then the train went off, and I altogether dismissed both him and his letter from my mind.

Sir Harry's bachelor rooms, from which it had not been thought advisable to move him, were close to our hotel, whilst Prince Crecszoleski was staying in St. James's Place.

Wishing to leave my meeting with him entirely to chance, I had not written to inform him of our arrival. The first time, however, that Miss Warden and I went out walking together, we fell in with him in Pall Mall, on his way to the National Gallery, after which he arranged that we should meet, upon one pretence or another, almost every day.

My father had now a professional nurse in close attendance upon him; the most perfect quiet had been enjoined; so that, beyond visiting his rooms every day, and sitting with him whilst the nurse was resting, or at her meals, our time was entirely at our own disposal.

Escorted by the Prince and accompanied by Miss Warden, I visited picture-galleries and museums, and attended lectures and *séances*. In a very little while I felt much more at my ease with him. Occasionally, but not often, I experienced a recurrence of the strange sensation which had oppressed me in the tea-room at Ingleby Grange, but the feeling seemed to become every time less acute and embarrassing. It was as if some sort of controlling power, hitherto possessed by the Prince, was gradually becoming exhausted.

I tried very hard at this time to persuade myself that

I was in love. In this I could not altogether succeed; but I developed, during this frequent intercourse, the greatest possible respect for the Prince's character and intelligence, and I had read in books that love generally followed very quickly upon esteem.

Miss Warden, though enthusiastic in her admiration of the Prince's amiable traits, was much embarrassed as to whether she ought to check, or to encourage, our growing intimacy. The cards — to which she turned in her uncertainty — foretold anxieties, travels, surprises (very much as they always did), a death, and then a fortunate marriage, with one of the most devoted husbands in the world, and beautiful children. The death (she could not help thinking) must be that of "poor Sir Harry." The reign of my cousin Courtenay was evidently drawing nearer and nearer every day!

Was this a time, my kind friend asked herself, to discourage the attentions of a rich and eligible suitor? And yet—seeing that the Prince was a foreigner—a Roman Catholic (as we had lately discovered), and that the whole thing had come about so suddenly—she desired much to find some human monitor to whom she could turn for counsel.

Finally, she had almost decided to write to my godfather, asking him to grant her an interview in order that she might consult with him upon my future prospects, when we saw recorded in the fashionable columns of "The Morning Post" that "The Honourable George Collingwood, Her Majesty's Minister at ——" had "passed through Paris on his way to resume his diplomatic duties;" whereupon her benevolent project necessarily evaporated in smoke.

So the days of a London September went by (of a London not in the least like the gay city which I have since known, and looked at with altogether different eyes), and "chill October" was at hand once more. By this time I had

finally decided to become Prince Crecszoleski's wife, and, after he had made the necessary arrangements, I walked out one morning, unknown to my "duenna," and was married to him according to the rites of the Protestant Church.

"The Protestant religion is quite good enough for me," he had made answer, when I asked him about his theological opinions. "'Heaven is a palace with many doors,' as the Hindoos tell us, 'and each one has a right to enter it his own way.' So let those who find happiness in their purgatories keep to them by all means—the whole four of them! Let the monks of Kiev build themselves living tombs in the catacombs of the Petcherskoi monastery. It is not our place to sneer at the exaggerations of religious feeling; but for me, Helen, the simple sacraments of your Reformed English Church will suffice.

Our marriage, for the present, at least, was to be kept a profound secret. Not even the Prince's sister, nor my god-father, were to be informed of it as yet. Miss Warden, for the convenience of our future meetings, was taken into our confidence *after the event*, for I feared that if I had told her of our intention beforehand she might be blamed afterwards for her connivance, supposing that my father, upon hearing of the step I had taken, should think fit to visit me with his displeasure.

One other person the Prince asked my permission to trust with our secret—his valet, Zoubiroff, a keen-eyed, cunning-looking Russian, who had not, somehow, inspired me with unlimited confidence when, upon the occasions of his calling with his master's notes, I had sometimes addressed a few words to him. The Prince assured me, however, that Zoubiroff was under important obligations to him—that he had been in his service for more than fifteen years, and had given repeated proofs of his fidelity and discretion. I did not, therefore, like to refuse my husband his very first request.

Immediately after our marriage we hailed a hansom cab at the church door, and drove to a jeweller's in Bond Street, the Prince desiring that I should select a present as a *souvenir* of the day.

I chose a ring—a "cat's-eye," surrounded by diamonds, as he seemed determined to give me something expensive. He paid for it on the spot, and we then re-entered our hansom.

"It will always remind me of your eyes," I said, as I looked at the ring upon my finger; "the stone is exactly like them in colour!"

I felt in wonderfully good spirits, and fired as with a sense of perilous adventure.

The day, however, which had begun by being fine, had clouded over whilst we were in church, and when I set the Prince down, a few doors from my destination, it was raining hard. He had made elaborate arrangements with me for a longer meeting upon the morrow, so that we did not expect to be parted for more than a few hours.

"*Au revoir, belle Princesse!*" he said, as he held my hand and leant towards me from the street, regardless of the falling rain. For the first time, I perceived an expression of tenderness in his strange eyes. "*A bientôt, n'est-ce pas?*" he added; and then the cabman let down the window and drove on.

Upon arriving at the hotel I was informed by the porter that a gentleman had called to see me during my absence, and that, hearing I was expected to return soon, he had waited for me for some time in the reading-room.

I looked at the card which he left for me when he departed, and read, as I half-expected, seeing that I was acquainted with so few "gentlemen"—

"Lt.-Colonel Davenant."

and, beneath the name, these few words, written in pencil,—

"Very sorry indeed to have missed seeing you. Am leaving England to-night for Vienna."

It was quite evident, I thought, that Courtenay and I were not intended to meet again as yet!

CHAPTER XIV.

HUGO'S "*bientôt*," as it happened, turned out to be a period of very nearly three months.

On the day following upon our marriage, and before I had had time to see him again, my husband was sent for by his sister to Paris. He left a letter for me to say that he would be back again with all speed. In a few days, however, there came another, informing me that, upon his arrival in the French capital, he was made acquainted with a circumstance which would oblige him, after all, to revisit Poland, in order that he might make certain arrangements at his country-house previous to the occupation of Mr. Marks.

By the time that this business was completed, and the Prince had returned to Paris, my father was considerably better, and we were in daily expectation of his being ordered abroad. I begged, therefore, that the Prince would postpone his return to England for the present, lest, by one of those provoking combinations which sometimes occur, we might be obliged to leave the country immediately upon his arrival in it.

He asked me, in reply, to endeavour to induce the doctors to send Sir Harry to the south of France—to Cannes, Nice, Mentone—anywhere upon the Riviera, as he could then arrange, without exciting suspicion, to

come to the same place—to the same hotel even, so that we might "at last pass together our honeymoon, so unexpectedly deferred."

The doctors yielded to my suggestion without any difficulty. The Riviera was the very place to which they had intended sending Sir Harry as soon as he could travel. His health continued to improve steadily after this, and, at the beginning of the New Year, we took our departure from England, and travelled south by easy stages.

We were accompanied by a courier, who had been engaged to valet and look after my father in addition to his other duties, by Mason, and by a professional nurse, who was to attend exclusively to the invalid.

Since my father's paralytic attack his nature seemed to have undergone an entire change for the second time. He was now much more docile and tractable. His mental powers were evidently a good deal impaired; he forgot easily, sometimes even seemingly scarcely to recognize us; repeated himself constantly, and laughed and wept at odd, unaccountable, moments; but he was much more capable than he had been previously of mere animal enjoyment. He slept well, ate heartily, and enjoyed the sunshine, and there were days when he would appear to be even interested in reading the newspapers, and in listening for awhile to our conversation. His mood, in fact, was more like that of a young child, who is cheerful and free from care, in spite of its helpless dependence upon others. He had completely lost the use of his left arm, but could move the right one almost as well as ever, and as the days went by he began to walk a little with the assistance of his attendant.

We had quite decided, now, upon the place at which we intended to sojourn. Our courier, who had been accustomed to travel with persons in delicate health, knew of a quiet and comfortable hotel in the environs of Nice. It was situated two miles at least from the

town (of which, with its life and movement, one might see just as much—or as little—as one desired), upon a southern hill-slope, amongst grey olive-grounds, with a view of snow-capped mountains at the back.

The families that frequented it were chiefly English, our courier informed us, and "very select"—elderly personages of rank, or "clergymen of the Established Church;" for it was too far from the town to be a popular resort with more frivolous pleasure-seekers. Hence it was the place of all others for an invalid. Having made up my mind to endeavour to "love, honour, and obey" the man who could scarcely, as yet, be called my husband, and to consult him upon every subject which could affect our happiness, I wrote to him for instructions immediately upon our arrival at Nice.

He begged me, in reply, to wait for a day or two until I had ascertained whether the hotel suited us, and then to engage a suite of apartments which should include an additional room communicating with it, as if for an expected friend. When I had done this, I was to make a little plan of the apartment, and send it to him at Monte Carlo, which he intended to make his headquarters for the present, and he would then write to the proprietors of the hotel, or send an emissary, if need be, requesting that a room might be retained for him answering precisely to the description I had furnished of the extra one adjoining our own. The people of the hotel would then be almost certain to ask us to give it up to the Prince, which we should agree to do, after a little show of hesitation, our friend being supposed to have postponed his intended visit.

These somewhat complicated tactics answered perfectly, and I could not repress a feeling of inward triumph when the landlady, after showing us, with pride, the letter which she had just received from the Polish Prince, demanded of us, as a great favour, the sacrifice of our additional

bedroom, "*Son Altesse étant un de nos plus anciens clients.*"

At about four o'clock on the following day we were informed that "*Son Altesse*" had arrived. My windows looked out upon the garden, so that I did not see him drive up to the door.

He had considered that it would be wiser, in order to disarm suspicion, not to appear as though he had known us before, but to seem to make our acquaintance by accident, whenever a favourable occasion should present itself. Upon the evening of his arrival, however, as soon as the household had retired to rest, he had arranged to come through to our sitting-room, and to have an interview with me there.

The hotel at which we were staying, once an Italian palace—and which I shall here call the Villa St. Hippolyte—was large and rambling. Our sitting-room was a spacious apartment, with a vaulted ceiling, appropriately adorned with frescoes representing hovering cupids, and an appearance of faded magnificence. Opening out from it upon the left hand was my bedchamber, looking out, like the sitting-room, into a lovely old terraced garden. Beyond this, again, was Miss Warden's, then Mason's, both having a different aspect, and then came my father's apartments, consisting of several rooms, which he never quitted during the day except when he went out to take the air, and which opened upon a corridor upon the opposite side of the house. To the left of our sitting-room, and likewise opening into it, was a small anteroom, scarcely more than a cupboard, in which we had deposited our travelling-boxes, and next to this was the apartment now occupied by my husband, which possessed another entrance, leading into a passage so far away from our own that no casual observer would have supposed that any communication existed between the rooms.

It was through this box-room that Hugo was to come

to me as soon as everything was quiet. I had obtained possession of the key, which was upon our side of the door, and had only to turn it as soon as the hour appointed for our meeting drew near.

As daylight gradually darkened to dusk I became terribly restless and uneasy; I wondered how the Prince would be able to let me know supposing he had been obliged to make any change in his original plan—whether he had impressed upon Zoubiroff the importance of discretion, and whether it would be possible, in spite of all our precautions, to keep our secret effectually from the people of the hotel?

As I reflected thus, feeling very nervous and apprehensive, it occurred to me that I might ask to speak, upon some pretext, with the Prince's valet, that I could then make him a present, enjoin discretion, and inquire after the health of his master.

I consulted with Miss Warden as to what reason we could give for wishing to see him, and she suggested that, as the Prince's room had been engaged by us, in the first instance, for a friend, we might appear desirous of knowing how long he would be likely to require it. The waiter came in at this moment, bringing our lamp. We asked him whether, if Prince Crecszoleski's servant was anywhere within call, we could speak to him upon the subject of his master's room? The waiter, a careless Italian youth, darted off at once to do our behest, and in another moment there came a quick rap at the door. We gave permission to enter, and a man stepped into the room from behind the folds of the *portière*. He was a total stranger!

I was so overcome with surprise that I could not summon words to address him.

Miss Warden came to the rescue, and inquired, in French, whether she was speaking to the Prince's valet?

The stranger replied in the affirmative, and we gathered from his speech that he must be a Frenchman. By this time we had recovered ourselves, and explained, for the sake of something to say, that, expecting an English friend, we had engaged the room which was now occupied by the Prince. Our friend, however, having postponed his visit for awhile, we had given up the room at the request of the landlady. Could we be informed how long Prince Crecszoleski would be likely to remain at the hotel?

The man replied, very politely, that he did not know. It was possible that his master would only remain till the end of the week, or he might stay on for an indefinite time. It was too soon, as yet, for him to decide. Also, His Highness had not confided to him his intentions. . . .

He bowed respectfully and retired. We experienced a sense of profound relief when the door had closed upon him.

I was much perturbed at discovering that Hugo, who had spoken so highly of Zoubiroff's devotion, should have had reason to dismiss him just after having confided to him our secret, and should find himself compelled to come, attended thus by a total stranger, upon an occasion when the services of a confidential person would have been of so much value.

As I pondered thus the evening wore on.

We dined as usual at half-past seven, in our own apartments, and at nine o'clock I went to bid my father good-night. Miss Warden remained with me in the sitting-room until ten o'clock, and then retired, after kissing me affectionately.

The evenings were very chilly, in spite of the heat of the noon-day sun, and the room, with its black marble floor, felt to me cold and tomb-like. I heaped up the fire with logs and fir-cones, pulled down the blower, and succeeded at last in making a cheerful blaze. In the middle

of the centre table was a basket of flowers which I had purchased that morning in the town—violets, anemones, and branches of feathery mimosa, which gave forth a delicious perfume. As I looked at these lovely southern blossoms my thoughts wandered, I know not wherefore, over sea to Northover churchyard. I beheld, in fancy, the nameless grave at which I had knelt and prayed for guidance; tears came into my eyes, which I could not control, and I wondered whether my mother's pure spirit might not be hovering near me at this supreme moment of my existence.

Feeling that it was impossible to remain still, I set about arranging upon the table the few books and photographs that I had brought with me from England, in order to lend a home-like and familiar air to the apartment. At about eleven o'clock I opened the door and peeped into the passage. The lights were all out, and I could only distinguish a few faint sounds in the far distance. It was evident that all the other occupants of our particular floor, at least, had retired for the night.

With faltering footsteps, I went through the box-room and up to the door of the Prince's room. My hands trembled so that I could scarcely turn the key in the lock. It was a long, awkward, ill-made key—I remember—fitting badly, and it flew back suddenly with quite an alarming noise. I feared that my husband's new valet, if he happened to be in attendance upon him, must certainly have heard it. The room seemed to be perfectly quiet, however. The faint odour of a cigarette was all that came to me through the chinks of the closed door.

I stole back again into the drawing-room and waited. Feeling that I was becoming dreadfully nervous and hysterical, I took up the newspaper and endeavoured to read, but found it utterly impossible to concentrate my thoughts. I saw the printed type, it is true, but its meaning entirely escaped me.

I then endeavoured to lift up my heart in prayer—to pray that my union with Hugo might bring happiness to us both—but alas, with no better result than when I had attempted to read! Finally, I drew the sofa to the hearth and fell to wondering, as I gazed into the midst of the glowing embers, how the Prince would look; what he would be likely to say; whether he would seem to me to be the same person as the one with whom I had parted in London; or, as happens sometimes, even after a shorter separation, an altogether different being? Whether his face would look tender, or weary, or a little cruel and untamed, as I had fancied that I had seen it look now and then? . . .

As I was musing thus, an old legend recurred to me, about a maiden who had promised herself to a lover who turned out to be a spectre, having only the outward similitude of man, with none of his passions or affections. A pale, ghostly bridegroom, whose steely eye-balls glittered in the wintry moonlight, whose heart lay frost-bound in his hollow breast, and the kiss of whose ghastly lips meant death! Then I thought of how terrible it would be if, through some error or misunderstanding, the room—the door of which I had just unlocked so noisily—had not been given to the Prince at all, but to some other man, who, bent upon looking into the cause of this sudden turning of his key, might walk in through the box-room, and confront me, at any moment. I said to myself that, if this were to happen, and supposing that a stranger were to appear before me at this hour, the state of my nerves was such that I should probably scarcely survive the shock!

I have said before how utterly impossible I have always found it in moments of emotion and suspense, to compute, with anything like correctness, the passing of time. I know not, therefore, how long it may have been before I heard the door upon the further side of the box-room

opened cautiously, and the Prince's footsteps stealthily approaching.

I looked up at him as he came in at the door, but felt that it would have been utterly impossible for me to have risen from my place. I saw that he was wearing a long wrapper, or dressing-suit of dark silk trimmed with sables, and that he held a candle in his hand which cast sharp lights and shadows upon his picturesque face.

Before speaking to me he went straight to the other door and secured it. As I heard the key turn in the lock my heart seemed to stand still with emotion. For the first time since my marriage, I realised that I had promised to give myself, body and soul, into the power of this man, and my heart failed me.

He came towards me; I could only stare blankly in his face.

I saw that he looked neither tender, nor weary, nor cruel. He looked *triumphant;* the look of all others which, in some circumstances, must seem least congenial to a woman's feelings.

I shrank back instinctively. He came to me, took my hand, drew me to the sofa, and looked in my face inquiringly. Then he asked me to tell him, once, of my own free will, whether I thought I now cared for him a little?

I knew not what to answer at that moment which should not wound or disappoint him; so, to gain time, I stroked the sable upon the breast of his coat with the hand he had left me free; smoothing it down the right way of the fur, and feeling the while as if I must soon break down and begin weeping.

Now that my hand was so close to his heart I could feel that it was beating violently. It came into my mind that although wild and uncontrollable passions might be lying, as it were in ambush, beneath that smooth brown fur, yet, because of this, I was assuredly not in the presence of any

spectre bridegroom, but of a being of flesh and blood, and this reflection had the effect of somewhat restoring my courage.

"I suppose that you have 'willed' all this?" I found voice to say at last.

"Ah, Helen!" he answered, as though half-reproachfully, "cannot you see that all my will has departed? When we, in our family, realise that our power of will has gone from us, we know well what it signifies!"

"Why have you lost it?" I asked, wondering. "You look the same—better than you did before. Why do you say your will is gone?"

"I have lost it," he answered, opening his arms to me; "because the moment has come when, for the first time, I can truly love! A new life opens before me, of which you are the absolute controller; I give into your keeping both my will and my heart!"

Then, looking up, I beheld, just over my head, the merry group of rosy Loves, sporting, like circling butterflies, amongst the blue and amber clouds upon the ceiling, and I remembered that this was the meeting to accomplish which I had been planning and plotting for weeks.

How often have I beheld them since—in fancy—those circling cupids! Somebody told me, the other day, that the beautiful old villa St. Hippolyte was now all deserted and dismantled; that bills of sale were set up in its broken windows, and that the lovely terraced-garden was all parcelled out into building lots. It was said that it was about to be pulled down, and that smaller villas were to be erected upon its site. And so, I suppose, that the dancing cupids are gone too, by this time,—fallen for ever from their high estate in the blue empyrean, and will never be able to look down from it at any honeymooning couples again!

CHAPTER XV.

It was a great relief to me when the Prince, having made acquaintance, one morning with my father, in the garden, was enabled to visit us openly, and accompany us upon our walks and drives.

Seeing that he was a personage of distinction, speaking English, too, with a fluency suggestive of English sympathies and associations, and seeing, too, that we were the only English family of any consideration at that time sojourning at the hotel, it must have appeared quite natural to the proprietors that he should prefer our society to that of the other visitors, and the rapid growth of our friendship seemed to be regarded with benevolent approbation by both landlord and landlady, who perceived that, by reason of it, the Prince would be likely to prolong his stay at their establishment.

I had inquired of my husband, upon the first opportunity, the reason of Zoubiroff's sudden dismissal. He replied that he had never dismissed him at all, but that the valet had, as it were, been spirited away in the most mysterious manner imaginable.

Whilst Hugo was in Paris, it appeared, Zoubiroff had gone out as usual to do a few commissions for his master. From this expedition, however, he had never returned, nor had he been seen or heard of since that day. Hugo knew that Zoubiroff owned a lodging-house in Paris where he had established his wife, a woman who had once lived with the Prince's sister as lady's-maid. To this place he sent at once to make inquiries, but all that Madame Zoubiroff could tell him, was, that upon the previous day her husband had never made his appearance, and that soon after the time at which he usually visited her, some strange men, belonging, she believed, to the secret police, had presented themselves at the apartments and had searched carefully amongst his effects, taking with them,

when they departed, not only all the private papers they could find, but also several articles of wearing-apparel, which he had left in her charge when he had passed through Paris at different times.

The Prince could only explain this strange circumstance by supposing that his valet, like so many of his countrymen, had associated himself with some secret society dangerous to the French or Russian Government, or else that the case was one of mistaken identity.

Had Hugo been remaining on in Paris he said that he should certainly have instituted further inquiries. As it was, however, he was so impatient to keep his appointment with me, at Nice, that he could not bring himself to delay his departure, and he had thought it wiser, for the strict maintenance of our secret, not to furnish Madame Zoubiroff with his present address. He had accepted, therefore, the services of an intelligent young man, one of the *employés* of the hotel at which he was staying, who had begged him to take him as his valet upon trial. Later on, he hoped to be able to obtain tidings of his missing servant. I inquired of my husband, also, whether his negociations with Mr. Marks had ended satisfactorily? He replied that Mr. Marks had just established himself at the home of the Crecszoleskis; that he appeared to be pleased with everything; and had been most obliging and considerate upon every subject.

At Delphine's suggestion, Hugo had paid a hurried visit to the *château*, having heard that Mrs. Marks was in a delicate state of health, and being anxious to put in hand a few improvements which would be conducive to her comfort. Mr. Marks had since decided, however, not to take his wife to Poland at this inclement season. Curiously enough, the Prince said, she was now staying at Nice; but as she was to join her husband in the spring, he did not regret that he had been enabled to set the place in better order.

All this he had heard through his sister. He, himself, had never had any personal interview with either Mr. Marks or his wife; so that, although this lady was now so near a neighbour, there would be no fear of her knowing him by sight, or commenting upon any circumstance which might lead to the discovery of our secret. Besides which, the Villa St. Hippolyte was, fortunately, quite out of the way of the town. . .

I know not in what words I can convey to the reader any notion of the extreme beauty of this same St. Hippolyte and its surroundings, without seeming to be over-enthusiastic. The climate of Nice, close to the shores of "the changeful Mediterranean," is frequently treacherous and harsh, and in spite of a burning sun the east wind, bringing with it clouds of blinding dust, seems to be lying in ambush at the corner of almost every street and by-way, ready to fly in the face of its victim.

But away from the sea-shore, up in the lovely country which is but little known to the tourist, the air is as soft and balmy as that of the Isles of Greece. Beneath the shade of the grey olive-trees, which, gnarled and twisted, bear often the burden of several centuries, the fertile soil is teeming with luxuriant vegetation. One by one, as the early spring days wear on, new and varied blossoms open their eyes to the sunlight. The purple anemone first, as harbinger of the brighter scarlet variety, which, rare at the beginning, and eagerly seized upon as a prize, warms the terraced hill-slope with ruddy patches as the days go by. The narcissus is the next to awaken from the sleep of an indulgent winter; then the great purple and yellow flags, or *fleurs de lis*, amongst their fluted blades of pointed foliage, and then the violets make their appearance in countless numbers, filling the soft air with their fragance.

As the weather grew warmer, Hugo and I would often wander in these pleasant flowery places. Little pathways led through the olive-grounds at the back of the old palace,

and up into the mountains beyond. The ascent was so gradual—so masked by twisted stems and branches, that it was quite a surprise to us, at first, upon reaching an open space, to look down the valley and see how far we were above the smiling town, the white houses of which we beheld in what seemed quite the far distance, by the shore of the bluest of blue seas.

Sometimes we came upon the primitive dwelling-places of the peasant proprietors, perched picturesquely in a sheltered spur of the mountain, with wine-press and olive-mill all complete, seeming, to my English eyes, more like rough stables than human habitations, and recalling to my mind the little houses and towers that I remembered to have seen depicted in some of the backgrounds of the early Italian masters, whose works I had admired in the London galleries.

As we wandered thus, there came into my mind, for the first time, a consciousness and appreciation of the old Pagan spirit, associating man and his pigmy heart-beats with the sublimer pulsations of nature—which died so hard, if, indeed, it has ever really died—before the teachings of more modern creeds:—

> "And old Silenus, shaking a green stick
> Of lilies, and the wood-gods in a crew
> Came, blithe, as in the olive copses thick
> Cicadæ are, drunk with the noonday dew;
> And Driope and Faunus followed quick,
> Teasing the god to sing them something new."

These were the classic shapes I was prepared to see lurking amongst the shadows, and I half-expected to espy the brown goat-foot gods, crouched down amongst the purple irises, and pouring forth the trickling streamlets from their earthen jars.

And all this time, the reader may inquire, did I experience any tenderer feeling for my husband? I know, now, that I was in love with the place—inspired by the

passionate and exultant vitality which seemed to be throbbing and expanding around me, and that I was conscious of the romance and mystery of the situation in which I found myself. I was grateful for, and gladdened by, Hugo's admiring devotion—his craving for my society; for to some women, even if they can mete out no very generous measure in return, it is much (so much!) to minister to the happiness of another, even supposing that this other fails in satisfying entirely their own unconscious yearnings!

To Hugo himself, however, apart from all the charm of his accessories, I could never make that absolute surrender which I have learnt since to identify with the intenser and more passionate forms of human affection. Perhaps, had life ended for me at about this time, I might never have known how different is Love's reckless and unreasoning madness from the calm, complacent, mood, in which I passed these early married days, and there must be many women who leave the world, hourly, in a like blissful ignorance:—

> "These questioned not; silent enduring souls,
> Who neither knew the best or worst of life!"

During our walks, my husband spoke to me often upon the subject of his religious opinions. He was relieved to find, he said, that I was not wedded to any particular form of bigotry, as was so often the case with Englishwomen, but that I seemed to be open to conviction upon almost every subject;—that Science had performed a mighty work in liberating us from enervating superstitions, but that it did not, of necessity, follow that those who were the most sceptical with regard to the established creeds, were, in consequence, less spiritually minded. With respect to what had hitherto been accepted as truth by the greater part of the civilised world, there had lately arisen, he said, a good deal of

discussion; but few had, as yet, been able to elaborate any convenient substitute for "the gods we had outgrown." He was of opinion that, amongst intellectual people, the prevailing spirit was one of scepticism, mingled with a desire to temporise and shirk all personal responsibility; so that they behaved, with regard to all obsolete faiths and fetishisms, very much as he remembered to have heard that a certain economical personage behaved in respect to some of his clothes, which, after his death, were found hoarded up in dark cupboards, and labelled, "Too old to wear, but too good to throw away."

For himself, Hugo said, there were but two questions which possessed any vital importance: Was there a personal Deity—a benevolent Father, who supervised and arranged all our human affairs, who could be moved by our prayers and interested in our actions? and, Was there an after-life, wherein our sensations would sufficiently correspond to those we had previously experienced, in the flesh, to entitle us to be considered in any respect as the same individual who had once walked upon earth? Whilst such questions as these remained unanswered, he said that he could only smile at the absurd "*enfantillages*" of certain learned priests and doctors of divinity, who could condescend to waste both breath and ink in lengthy discussions as to whether the forbidden fruit of Scripture was an apple or a pear; whether the officiating clergyman should crawl towards the altar like a lizard, or approach it after a more convenient fashion; or whether he should lift or lower the extreme tip of his elbow during the celebration of the Holy Communion!

My husband next spoke to me upon the subject of mesmerism, hypnotism, and clairvoyance, &c. He mentioned, besides, several other "hard names" which I did not remember ever to have heard before. He almost feared, he said, to converse with me upon these matters

until my mind had been enlightened by a little preparatory reading, lest I should look upon him as the victim of a monomania. With the view of educating me, however, he had brought with him several books, treating upon these, and other, analogous subjects, which he would give me upon the very earliest opportunity; and, on the evening following upon this conversation, as he was about to leave me for the night, he asked me to come with him in order that he might give me the books in question. I followed him to his room, and looked, with mingled feelings of shyness and curiosity, at all the unfamiliar manly things that I beheld for the first time. He searched in a portmanteau for the books, and, having found them, handed them to me, and begged that I would read them with attention. I saw that two of the books were in German—a language of which I possessed, at this time, only a rudimentary knowledge. I told Hugo this, but he said that I might be able to understand them with the help of a dictionary; if not, he would endeavour to obtain for me an English translation as soon as possible.

The titles of the books were certainly somewhat alarming; they ran thus:—

"A Journal of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism," by T. Zoist (in thirteen vols.) Vol. I.

"Subversion of Materialism," by Prebendary J. Dennis.

"On Force and its Mental Correlates," by Charles Bray.

"Physiologie, Médecine, et Métaphysique du Magnétism," par J. Charpignon.

"La Clef des Grands Mystères," par Eliphas Levi.

"Die Sympathetisch Magnetische Heilkunde." J. Scheible.

"Von der alten and neuen Magie-Ursprung, Idee, Umfang, und Geschichte." Georg Conrad Horst.

"You must read each day a portion of one of these books, my Helen," he said, "and you will then learn to understand better the dreams and ambitions of your husband."

Then he kissed me, and bade me good-night, and I stole back, through the deserted rooms, with my armful of occult literature.

CHAPTER XVI.

My mesmeric and spiritualistic reading, supplemented by Hugo's explanations, enabled me, ere long, to form some idea of what he had spoken of as his dreams and ambitions. Without allowing myself to be influenced by what Mr. Collingwood had told me, to the effect that both my husband and his sister were "a little mad," I certainly found it difficult to follow the Prince in some of his aerial flights. His dreams struck me as being altogether dreams — fantastic and impracticable; his ambitions impossible of attainment, and therefore profitless. I perceived that he was a mystic—that he listened to voices (as my godfather had said) which nobody else could hear; but his character seemed to be so generous and tractable, his mind so just and unprejudiced, and his heart so entirely my own, that I had no wish to quarrel with him for holding opinions which, as yet, I was unable either to share or to comprehend.

Those that I could grasp with less difficulty, had reference to the social intercourse of daily life, and to the salutary or baneful effects which may be produced, upon highly sensitive organisations, by their human surroundings.

Some of these ideas, I believe, are shared by a religious community styling themselves "the Brotherhood of the

New Life," although I never heard that my husband had had any connection with them. I possessed myself, the result of certain physical experiences, some notions of the same kind, but it had never occurred to me to formulate them, as I should scarcely have known how to distinguish my real impressions from those that were purely imaginary.

Hugo, however, being, as he informed me, constitutionally sensitive to mesmeric influences, had had the consideration of this subject forced upon him, having been, he said, actually paralysed, at times, in what he termed his "volitional power" by a nature stronger, in several respects, than his own, with which it had been his fate to be perpetually brought in contact. He had endeavoured, as soon as he fully realised the extent of this domination, to escape from it by various means. But, in spite of the power which he could obtain over some gentler natures, he was, in this case, utterly helpless, and had finally come to regard this particular person as his absolute controller.

It had occurred to him, however, that, could he only fortify and vitalise himself by a threefold union of mind, body, and soul, with a being strong enough to renew the forces capable of being thus absorbed and withdrawn, he might be enabled, perhaps, successfully to counteract this previous subjection of spirit, and return to his normal condition. He alluded to this second influence as a sort of "cross-mesmerisation," productive sometimes, he informed me, of "a state of absolute mental chaos," and dangerous, for this reason, in cases where the limits of the *rapport* about to be established had not been carefully defined and considered.

There were, however, he said, so many difficulties in his path, that, at the time of our meeting, he had almost abandoned the idea as impossible of realisation. Women who would surrender to another all that it was in their

power to give, nobody would have despaired of finding. But when a weak and irresponsible being pours forth her whole soul, or delivers her feeble individuality into the keeping of the man she professes to love, it is merely as if one were to deluge a wine cask with white rain-water. She gives him, not of her strength but of her weakness. He becomes merely the recipient of what she has found worthless and ineffectual in herself. But then,—Hugo continued,—he had already experienced the disadvantages attendant upon an association with an imperious and uncompromising will! Where would it be possible for him to discover the being who should possess, in a proper proportion, the qualities to be desired, and who would exercise her dominion discreetly, wisely—above all, *mercifully?*

"*Nowhere!*" was the sad answer that seemed always to come to him whenever he asked himself this question; and so, as he informed me upon the occasion of his first visit to Northover, neither marriage nor affection had entered into the programme of his existence, and all women had seemed to him to be "like dolls," until he had found himself seated by my side in the tea-room at Ingleby Grange. He perceived in me, then, he said—or he had imagined that he had perceived—a certain mixture of wisdom and ignorance, of helplessness and self-reliance, which had impressed him as he had never been impressed by anything of the kind before. He saw that I was possessed of "one of those exceptional feminine natures" that are capable of standing alone intellectually—that I could form an independent judgment, trust to the penetration of my own mind, and that I should have no need to fasten upon other intellects and derive my sustenance from them like a vampire. I should take from another only what I required to complete my own nature, and *affection* was all that I unconsciously put forth my will to obtain.

There was a legend in his family, he said, to the effect that the dominion over the minds of others, which was peculiar to his race, would cease to exist in the individual who should experience the passion of love in its utmost intensity. "When thou shalt give over thy heart, thy mind, and thy soul, into the keeping of one that thou lovest utterly with thy threefold nature, then shall thine enemies obtain the dominion over thee." So ran the legend.

He assured me, however, that he had never felt any such love as this for the "doll" women he had previously fallen in with, and he had fancied that it would be impossible for him ever to experience it in the future, until he had met with the one being whom he believed to be capable of "completing and regenerating" his whole nature.

He told me that, previous to our marriage, he had endeavoured to test the power of my intellect and my "volition," and that he had found himself capable, in most instances, of maintaining that ascendancy which ought always to be the portion of the husband. It was with this object that he had exerted his magnetic influence at the ball, and had "willed," afterwards, that I should meet him in the old summer-house at a particular hour. I told him that I had decided to go there of my own accord, urged by a combination of circumstances with which his "volition" could have had no connection whatever, and that even the inclination, thus awakened, had abandoned me long before the hour of the proposed meeting. He replied that this might possibly be explained by the fact that, as soon as he became certain of proceeding to London, he had felt that it would be useless to put forward any further effort of will.

But his object, he said, was not, now, to prove that he was the stronger of us two. He desired, on the contrary, to make me an admission which he would hesitate to

make to any other woman living. He then confessed to me—speaking with some emotion—that he found himself completely at my mercy. All his boasted philosophy, he said, had failed him for the first time. He loved me utterly and entirely, with all the love of which his being was capable. His will, his "magnetism," had all departed from him; he had surrendered his existence into my hands!

Seeing that he appeared to be really alarmed as to the consequences which might ensue upon this departure from his original plan, I said all that I could to reassure him. He told me that the family tradition, about falling into the power of his enemies, was not what disturbed him. He regarded this merely as a salutary warning, directed, in the abstract, against the allurements of the Delilahs of life—syrens with whom the warrior might dally whilst his sword was rusting in its scabbard, his charger stamping in its stall, and whilst the foemen were even at the city gate. His apprehensions arose from a sense of his present inability to counteract, and withstand, the power to which he had previously alluded, should he find himself, as might happen at any moment, once more within reach of its influence. I asked him if this power was wielded by a person who was his enemy? He replied, No; that the influence was not intentionally malignant, and that it had, on some occasions, been exerted for his benefit, but that it had always had the effect of paralysing his will, and of rendering him helpless as an infant. All he had desired was, to be enabled to encounter the person who exercised it upon a footing of equality; to be no longer a puppet in the hands of another. But now, his strength was gone; he had no weapon wherewith to defend himself! . . .

I told him in spite of my being unable, wholly, to comprehend his fears, that if, indeed, his will had been surrendered into my hands, it should be my mission to

meet, and combat, the paralysing influence to which he had referred. He said that, if I could only do this, all would be well; he should then cast from him, for ever, the mortifying memories of the past, and resign himself to his present happiness, which was greater than anything he could have before imagined.

I was rejoiced to think that it was in my power to minister thus to my husband's happiness. Ever since I had arrived at woman's years, I had been possessed of an intense craving to protect, to soothe, to comfort, some being whose life could be made brighter by my sympathy and friendship. That Hugo should cling to me thus seemed to count, in my eyes, as one of the greatest of his merits.

He asked me, frequently, whether I was certain that I cared for him, and told me that, if so, I could not remind him too often of my affection, since, in this respect, he "was like a woman,"—deriving strength and encouragement from spoken assurances, and never wholly free from apprehension that the discovery of some of his numerous defects might make a difference in my heart.

I told him, what was then no more than the truth, that I perceived in him none of the defects to which he alluded; that I cared for him more than I had ever cared for anybody else; that I was proud of, and grateful for, his affection, and that I looked forward to the day when we should be able to avow our marriage.

He seemed, however, to be always a little mistrustful, even after my repeated assurances, telling me that, "for a woman who was really in love," I "kept my head" as he had never known a woman keep it before in like case. I have since thought that, perhaps, he could read my heart better than I then knew how to read it myself!

Once the Prince inquired of me, very earnestly, what discovery would be the most likely to estrange a woman's affection from the man she had previously loved? what

defects in his character would be certain to render him for ever hateful in her eyes?

I considered for some time before replying, and then said that I thought the discovery of meanness, cowardice, or untruthfulness—the defects, in fact, of a bad woman—was what would render a man contemptible in my eyes, and that I fancied it would be impossible to love a man one utterly despised, although one might forgive those faults which resulted from misdirected impulse, however serious their consequences.

We were driving together, when the Prince asked me this question, along the lovely road which lies between Nice and Villafranca. We had started upon our way accompanied by Miss Warden, to save appearances, but had deposited her on the *Promenade des Anglais*, intending to pick her up on our homeward way, three not being, as she herself remarked, a very convenient number for private conversation.

I noticed that Hugo seemed strangely anxious that I should explain more fully the significance of my words.

He took my hand in his, looked earnestly in my face, and asked me whether, by "meanness," I intended to refer to a want of generosity with regard to money, and whether, by "cowardice," and "untruthfulness," I meant that kind of moral timidity which might spring from an excusable desire to spare another person the pain of some unpleasant avowal, or a want of physical courage to face and combat assailing dangers?

I replied that I was not thinking of meanness merely in connection with money, since a person might have some generous motive for the practice of economy; but that by "meanness, cowardice, and untruthfulness," I meant rather the traducing of a friend behind his back, the striking of a man when he was down, and the conscious misrepresentation of facts from interested and selfish motives.

The Prince became somewhat pensive and silent after this, but I do not think that my answer could have either pained or annoyed him, for he continued to hold my hand in his until the end of our *tête-à-tête*, saying that he derived "courage, consolation, and hope" from the contact.

I drew off my glove, being proud of my beautiful cat's-eye ring, and, thinking to make him smile, clenched my fist with mock ferocity, and told him that whilst I was by his side to defend him, and to combat the sinister influence to which he had just alluded, he need be in no fear of falling into the power of his enemies. But he only looked graver than before, and I perceived that he regarded this subject as one that was much too serious to jest about.

CHAPTER XVII.

On the evening following upon this drive, as I was sitting with my husband in the drawing-room, the door leading into the passage quietly opened and Mason emerged unexpectedly from behind the folds of the *portière*.

It happened that Hugo had come to me, upon this occasion, by way of the balcony, which extended from his room to ours, and so in at the window, in order to avoid all noise, and I suppose it was the making of this slight change in his programme which had caused him to forget to secure the door.

Upon beholding Prince Crecszoleski seated familiarly by my side upon the sofa, arrayed in his sable-trimmed toga—obviously the costume of the bed-chamber—the poor woman was naturally transfixed with horror and amazement. She stood for some seconds contemplating

us in silence, and then, after murmuring "Oh, Miss Helen!" in a voice full of reproach and consternation, she burst into a flood of tears.

We both rose simultaneously to our feet. To my intense relief, Hugo at once told her the truth. "We have been married since the month of October, Mrs. Mason," he said, "so there is no occasion for uneasiness. But for your master's precarious condition, and the doctor's recommendation to avoid all that might agitate him, we should have made our confession before now. I must hope that you will feel disposed to be as good a friend to me, in the future, as you have proved to my wife in the past."

The news seemed to surprise her greatly. She had been generally in such close attendance upon Sir Harry that she had had no opportunity of observing our growing intimacy, and her ignorance of French had prevented her from understanding any of the gossiping remarks which it might have occasioned in the hotel. Her unexpected appearance, therefore, had not been due to any suspicion upon her part. She had merely come to borrow some wood, and fir-cones, for Sir Harry's fire, as he was feeling a little chilly. Hugo begged her, for the present, to treat his communication as confidential.

As soon as we were once more alone, I asked my husband whether he really meant soon to declare our marriage? He replied that in this, as in all things, he would be guided entirely by me. I was pleased and flattered at this patient subservience to my will, which I had observed, of late, often followed upon some desire of mine to which I had not even given audible expression.

Perhaps, I have since thought, having learnt how rare it is for a man to assume, after marriage, the submissive manner of a lover, I may not have seemed sufficiently grateful for this voluntary departure from the generally approved male tactics. As yet, however, I was not ex-

perienced enough to know that his behaviour was at all exceptional. Woman, in the arrogance of her youth and beauty, and man in the consciousness of his strength, are apt to be somewhat exacting, and to accept, as a matter of course, those good gifts which appear to them, in after years, in the light of generous concessions. In these days, however, I was neither in a position to analyse nor to make comparisons. I have made them since, with the result of summoning tears to my eyes, and vain regrets to my heart; and in order that I may absolve my conscience from this suspicion of seeming ingratitude, I have tried to believe that Hugo's tender and obedient demeanour may have been partly involuntary. That he might, perhaps, have endeavoured to dominate and dictate, like any other husband, but that being, as he termed it, "a sensitive" and influenced by me in his "volitional power," he recognised his own inability to combat and oppose my wishes. In a word, that his docility may have been as much a result of mesmerism as of affection. But I am as ignorant, now, upon this subject, as I was then.

Before parting for the night, we had agreed that, upon the morrow, Sir Harry should be informed of our marriage. It had been previously arranged that on this day we were to make an expedition to Monaco, or Monte Carlo, as it is more generally called. We now settled that, after driving there in the morning, breakfasting at the Hôtel de Paris, and looking on for a little while at the gambling, Miss Warden and I should stroll about in the grounds, leaving my father and Hugo seated together upon the terrace, and that there the Prince should gradually break the news of the important step we had taken.

As I desired, in spite of the displeasure which I felt certain that I should incur, to inform my godfather of it also, and as the Prince had, as yet, confided in no member of his own household except in Zoubinoff, the cause of whose sudden disappearance remained still a mystery, I

asked him whether he would not like, before communicating our secret to Sir Harry, to confide in his sister Delphine, in order that she might not feel wounded at his reticence towards her once our marriage became publicly known?

A cloud passed over his brow at the mention of this name. I had noticed before that, in spite of his professed affection for her, allusions to his sister seemed to awaken memories which were not altogether agreeable, and, for this reason, I had generally changed the conversation before I had obtained much definite information respecting a person to whom I had become so nearly related.

I now inquired of Hugo who his sister had married; whether she had any children; and whether he thought that she would approve of our union, and that we should all be good friends? He replied—his face still wearing an unaccountable expression of pain—that his sister had married when very young, a man old enough to have been her father, one General Dobrowolski, with whom, however, he believed that she had lived happily until his death, which occurred only a few years after the marriage. She had then remained a widow for a while, residing chiefly in Paris and Vienna, and occasionally at her old home. Eventually, however, she had re-married. This time her marriage was not so happy. Her husband, although both wealthy and learned, was beneath her in position. The marriage had not been pleasing to her family. Neither by this union, nor by the former one, had she had any children, and she was now, for the second time, a widow.

I remarked to my husband that, as his sister's second marriage had been displeasing to him, she would hardly be in a position to criticise, or complain of, his own, and that I thought no time ought to be lost before writing to inform her of it. To this he replied that some women were strange, unreasonable, over-sensitive beings, and

that it was impossible for him to predict how even his own sister might behave in a case like the present. He did not imagine for a moment that she would see any cause for objection, but she was deeply attached to him, and had always shown herself to be, to a certain extent, jealous of his affection. Also, she was in the position of his heir, and had been accustomed to take an active part in the management of his estates. On the whole, therefore, Hugo said that he would prefer to wait until he could make sure of a personal interview with her. She visited Paris almost every year at Easter. On our way back to England he would make an appointment with her there, and would then tell her of the change he had made in his existence, instead of writing.

"But this is no reason why you should not confide in our good friend, George," he added, in response, as it seemed, to my earnest inward desire; "for as my good friend I shall continue to count him, although he believes me to be little better than a harmless maniac! But for his hospitality I should never, perhaps, have met with my beloved Helen. George Collingwood has earned my eternal gratitude!"

Hugo then spoke to me, almost for the first time, of his parents. His mother, he said, was a wife after the pattern of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, "imbued with all the Manichean asceticism of the saints of the Middle Ages," and who had come under the influence of a priest as arbitrary and bigoted as Conrad of Marpurg. In her desire to attain to the ideal of apostolic holiness, she separated herself from her husband, in spite of her deep affection for him, having persuaded herself that those family ties to which we all of us owe our existence, were merely degrading snares of the Evil One, which it was our duty to resist and forego. She sought, therefore, the sanctuary of a convent shortly after the birth of her daughter, where, in spite of the repeated entreaties of her husband,

she lived for over eight years in pious retreat. At the end of this time, how, and wherefore, it was impossible to explain after all the years that had elapsed, she was induced once more to resume her married life, and the Prince, her husband, was rejoiced, some two years afterwards, by the birth of a son, for which event he had most ardently longed. His satisfaction, however, was but of short duration. This son cost his mother her life, and his father soon afterwards followed her to the grave.

"I am the child, therefore," said Hugo, in conclusion, "of my father's passionate desire—of my mother's reluctant surrender. The poor woman would have wished me to have been born entirely of the Spirit, and there have been moments in my life when I have felt that there was in my nature an intense sympathy with the inhabitants of an unseen world. Then, my father's practical, material, nature, is triumphant. I descend from the cold regions of the clouds and resign myself with enthusiastic eagerness to the allurements of earth. My sister, the first child of this incongruous union, is possessed of a more masculine nature. Like her father, she is resolute, self-reliant, fearless, and strongly imbued with the materialistic spirit; and yet *she*, too, has her inspired moments —her admonitions from the invisible world! It is curious to observe how we are all made up of contradictions; surely we can scarcely designate a person as 'an individual' when so many opposing individualities are making war in his blood! As Eugene Sue has said, 'To comprehend everything is to forgive all!'"

I now thought that I had probably penetrated the mystery which had seemed to me, hitherto, to envelope the existence of Hugo's sister, and that I could account satisfactorily for the cloud which was wont to appear upon his brow at the mention of her name. She was an eccentric, self-willed woman, at whose hands he had probably suffered many things, "strongly imbued with the

materialistic spirit," and she had made an undesirable second marriage which had displeased her family.

Was she the person who had dominated him? I wondered; who represented the influence "stronger in several respects" than his own with which he had told me that it had been his fate to "be perpetually brought in contact"; which had had the effect of paralysing his "volitional power," and which it was my appointed mission to mitigate and counteract? Some day, no doubt, all would be made plain to me, and, in the meantime, I did not think that it would be generous on my part to cross-question my husband upon what was evidently an unpleasant subject.

I wrote to my godfather by the early post upon the following day, and experienced a sense of relief when I knew that my letter had actually started upon its way. I felt, however, that I must not indulge in unalloyed satisfaction until I knew in what spirit Sir Harry would receive the intelligence which was to be communicated to him later on in the day, and I could not help looking forward to our expedition to Monte Carlo with a good deal of anxiety.

CHAPTER XVIII.

I HAVE often wondered whether there is really anything in what is called "a presentiment of evil" or not? Many others have, doubtless, wondered likewise; or have endeavoured to connect the gloomy forebodings which have, at times, oppressed them, with some definite calamity which may afterwards have come to pass.

For my own part, I am inclined to think that misfortunes are apt to come upon us unexpectedly, "shod with

silence," and numbing us with the shock of a surprise; and I even hold a kind of superstitious belief that, to anticipate an evil, goes some way towards preventing it.

Be this as it may, beyond a natural anxiety as to the result of Hugo's communication to my father, I do not remember experiencing any marked sense of dread or uneasiness upon the morning of this particular day. I had risen betimes, and, after writing my letter to Mr. Collingwood, I wandered forth into the old Italian garden, before Miss Warden had made her appearance.

This garden—which I have never beheld since these days of my early married life, and which it is unlikely that I shall ever behold again—if it be true that it is now portioned out into building lots—was a delicious dream of luxuriant southern beauty. It was disposed in shady terraces, ornamented with roughly sculptured mediæval seats and figures, whence the town of Nice, with the blue Mediterranean beyond, could be seen outspread in glittering panorama. At the back of the old palace, the higher peaks of the snow mountains were sparkling in the morning sun; whilst to right and left, rose the grey, olive-clad hills, amongst which Hugo and I had so often wandered.

The intense beauty of this scene, combined, as it was, with a perfect climate, inspired me with a physical joy in living which was altogether new to me. My soul became flooded with tender emotion, and, turning towards the house, I gazed up at Hugo's windows, wishing that he would come out and join me in the garden. As I was looking thus, with this wish for him in my heart, he threw back the green shutters and stepped out upon the balcony.

I suppose that I possess one of those natures that can love best what I know to be really my own; what I can take without let or hindrance, or self-reproach, to my heart; the reverse, in fact, of what I have "heard tell" of the male disposition. In spite of my liking for the

romantic and exceptional aspects of existence, I was heartily tired, now, of prevarications and concealments. I had gone through all the excitement which usually accompanies an intrigue, and was familiar with most of the subterfuges consequent upon a clandestine marriage; but I realised, at this moment, that I should probably feel a warmer and deeper affection for my lover once I could openly acknowledge him as my husband, and that I did not take any additional pleasure in his society because he had occasionally come to me through the window instead of the door. Was it the crisp inspiring air of the morning, the perfume of violets and orange-blossom, the glimpses of far mountain and blue ocean? I know not; although such combinations may tend, at times, to lend an unsuspected bias to our mood. I know, however, as I look back to this day, that I had never come so near to loving Hugo Crecszoleski as upon this particular morning. He perceived me immediately, made a sign that he did so, and in a few minutes he was standing beside me upon the terrace. It was a moment that I shall remember as long as I live, however much I may desire to forget it.

He took my hand, and I felt, at once, that he both understood and shared my emotion. Who can tell, had events been ordered differently, of what new and undisturbed contentment this sense of mutual sympathy might not have made the beginning? *Something*,—a shadow, a suspicion, an unaccountable feeling of painful anticipation and restraint, had seemed, until now, to stand between my husband and myself. I hoped that this was about to lift and disperse, like the mists of the morning. It had been occasioned, I fancied, by the exceptional position in which I had found myself placed, and by all the mystery and insincerity resulting therefrom. A calmer, brighter existence was about to unfold before me, and I was experiencing, to-day, the first manifestations of this

new state. I know not, wholly, whether I ought to rejoice, or to lament, because my impression turned out to be a wrong one. Life is so strange, with its surprises, its contrasts, its vague and unprofitable regrets. *Mine* must have been altogether different, of course, had I become the sport of different circumstances. My affections, my ambitions, my failings, would have been all other than they are, and my story, it may be, even less worthy than now of note or record.

"We judge others," George Eliot says, "according to results. How else? Not knowing the process by which results are arrived at."

Could we but comprehend this "process," and thus direct the course of these "results," man would be lord of creation, indeed, and stand in need of no higher guidance!

As had been previously arranged, we started upon our expedition at about ten o'clock, and upon our arrival at Monte Carlo, breakfasted at the Hôtel de Paris. The beauty of the place charmed and fascinated me. I said to myself that when our marriage had been declared and acknowledged, I should ask Hugo to bring me here again, from time to time, in order that we might drink in warmth and sunshine whilst it was winter in our English home. For that we should have a home in England, some day, Hugo had seemed quite confident,—ever since his negociations with Mr. Marks had taken such a satisfactory turn.

My father's voice recalled me to the present as I was musing thus.

"This is a first-rate place," he remarked, addressing himself to Hugo, "for a fine young bachelor like you, but an old fellow like me feels rather like a fish out of water amongst all these gay folks!"

"I hope not to remain a bachelor, always," returned the Prince with a glance towards the place where I was

sitting; "and I hope, too, when I am married, not to be cut off, for that reason, from all pleasant places, which should, in such happy circumstances, seem to become only the more enjoyable."

He spoke, as he usually did, in a somewhat stilted and elaborate manner. I felt, however, that he meant what he said, and, as I agreed cordially with the sentiments expressed, I sent him a kindly glance across the little marble table at which we were taking coffee after our luncheon.

"Don't ever marry, Prince," Sir Harry went on, with the manner of one who had given the subject his most serious consideration, "women are all sly cats; they've no shame, no honour, no compassion! The gentler, the kinder, the more grateful and humble they seem, the more ready are they to betray you or stab you in the back! If I had been as good a hand with my pen as I was, once, with my gun, I think I should have set down all their badness in a book, and then printed it, and shot myself afterwards, perhaps! But it's too late, now, to talk of what one would have done once. Only, you, Prince, take the advice of an old man. Use them for your own pleasure as long as they can amuse you, and then fling them upon one side; for, believe me, they're none of them worth keeping! And, above all, don't be fool enough to marry one of them, and let her creep into your heart! Women are sly cats!"

My father's tones had grown in bitterness as he went on. I was at a loss to imagine what could so suddenly have aroused him from his usual torpor to this pitch of angry denunciation. At the same time, I was not altogether sorry that Hugo should become aware of the strange alternations of mood to which Sir Harry was occasionally subject. It was far better that, as my husband, he should know precisely how I had been situated at home; and it would make him careful, too, in the

future, to avoid saying or doing anything which might call forth these ebullitions of ill-humour.

Miss Warden, in a discreet "aside," whispered to me that she attributed this unexpected outburst to the cup of black coffee and the *petit verre* of "*fine champagne*" of which Sir Harry had rashly partaken. We had been repeatedly warned that stimulants were bad for him; but he had seemed so much better of late, that, in a public place, we had not liked to subject him to any restrictions.

In order to turn the subject, Hugo now proposed, with great tact, that we should go and look on at the gambling. We asked him if he intended to play himself? He replied, Yes, for a wonder, just to see whether he was in luck or not. I, too, had come prepared to risk at least a Napoleon at the tables, with the same object. Miss Warden, who confessed, now, that she had always been conscious that a wild passion for gambling had lain dormant in her secret soul for years, was determined to yield to it,—just this once, and to hazard a five-franc piece. The proceeds of this first crime—for such she said she felt it to be—(supposing there were any,) were to go towards swelling the funds for the new English church, which was just then in course of erection within sight of where we were sitting.

After settling our account with the waiter, we were about to rise from our places, when Hugo suddenly changed colour, and, turning to me, said, in an agitated undertone—

"No! Helen; I shall not tempt fortune to-day, neither at the tables nor in any other manner! I should have no chance this morning; I am not in luck; the Seven Sleepers have turned!"

I had come to know the meaning of this figurative speech. It had reference to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, who, according to ancient tradition, turned over upon their sides whenever any calamity threatened Christendom.

Hugo—who, as I was now aware, held many curious opinions—did not consider the legend altogether in the light of a myth. He had told me that he regarded their sleep as a mesmeric trance, and believed that they might have turned occasionally in the course of it. When, therefore, he said "the Seven Sleepers have turned," he meant to convey that he fancied he was menaced by some stroke of bad luck.

Whilst my father—who remained sitting at the little round table from which the rest of our party had risen—stared vacantly at the gaily-dressed figures that went flitting to and fro in the sunshine, the Prince whispered in my ear that he thought it would be imprudent to broach the subject of our marriage whilst Sir Harry was in such an irritable mood. He would go into the *Salle de Jeu*, he said, and see if there were any places at the tables, returning to fetch us if he found that the company was "not too objectionable." He left us hereupon, and went off in the direction of the Casino.

I gazed after him as he went; and, as I watched his tall, graceful, figure, passing out into the full sunlight and crossing the broad gravel walk, experienced something like pride as I contrasted this distinguished-looking man—my husband—with some of the other visitors assembled upon the terrace. His appearance seemed to excite the notice, and—as I fondly imagined—the admiration of most of these. Several of the prettily-dressed ladies looked back at him from under their lace parasols, after he had passed; and two men in particular, who were loitering about the entrance to the Casino, nudged one another as he went in at the door, and exchanged a few remarks, as I fancied, to the Prince's advantage. All this pleased and gratified me. As I have already admitted, I was, upon this particular day, in an unusually susceptible and emotional state; but, whatsoever her mood, it must always be gratifying, I should think, to a

woman when she recognises the physical attractions of the husband she has chosen, and when she is conscious that other people are aware of them also. Esteem and respect, we are told, should rest upon a more solid foundation; but, be this how it may, I was glad to know upon this sunny February morning that Hugo was, outwardly, so good to look upon; and I think if I was ever really fond of him that I was fond of him then.

"Good-looking fellow!" remarked Sir Harry, rousing himself from his reverie, and seeming also to be impressed with my husband's comeliness; but if he's making love to you, Nelly, we shall have to give him the cold shoulder! Your husband was chosen for you very soon after you were born."

"You mean Courtenay Davenant," I said; "but indeed, indeed, papa, that can never be! Besides, Courtenay was against it himself. He objected to the marriage of first cousins."

"Young people are fools, miss!" returned Sir Harry, sharply. "I heard all he had to say against it in London, and, after giving him a few pages of family history, I brought him round to my way of thinking. It's uncommonly lucky that he ended by taking my view, as it's the only way of making everything straight and comfortable for you both!"

He did not pause for a reply, but turned his back upon us abruptly; and, adjusting some field-glasses which he had brought with him, seemed to become absorbed in a contemplation of the far sea-view.

I thought how differently these words, which he had just uttered, would have affected me only a few months ago—before I had taken the law into my own hands, and arranged the plan of my existence according to my own notions. How wounded I should have felt at the idea that Courtenay should have been talked over by my father and "brought round" (much against his will, no

doubt, and entirely from motives of self-interest) to his "way of thinking." This veering round again, upon my cousin's part, to the original family scheme, accounted (I thought) for his proposal to visit Northover, and for the card which had been left upon me on the very morning of my wedding.

I had no wish to annoy my father by saying anything more upon the subject. When it would be safe for us to declare our marriage, I did not know. I should be of age, however, in the following December, and before that time, something might turn up to make our path easier. For the moment, I only experienced a sense of unalloyed triumph, and I smiled towards the place where Miss Warden was standing, with the smile of one who has confounded, by her own prowess, the selfish machinations of her persecutors.

As I was musing thus, I saw Hugo emerge from the doorway of the Casino. He had scarcely passed out into the sunshine, however, before one of the two men I had already observed, stepped forward, and laid hold of his coat collar. Almost simultaneously, the second man seized him by the right arm. The Prince started, and ejaculated something, but we were too far off to catch his words.

It all happened in a moment. Miss Warden and I looked on in the greatest amazement, scarcely believing the testimony of our own eyes.

My father was still looking through his glasses in the direction of the Mediterranean, and so saw nothing of what was happening.

The two men who had hold of Hugo now led him quickly in the direction of the hotel at which we had breakfasted. As they came near to where we stood, petrified with astonishment, he made a sign to them to stop.

"I am arrested," he whispered, in a hurried and agi-

tated voice, holding out to me the only hand that was free, as though to grasp mine for comfort.

I made up my mind, at once, that it must be, of course, a case of mistaken identity, and that as soon as the detectives,—for detectives they evidently were,—had interrogated their prisoner, all would be satisfactorily explained. I did not attempt, therefore, to sympathise or condole with my husband. It had all happened so suddenly, so unexpectedly, in the course of a few seconds only, that there had not been time for me to collect my ideas. I noticed, when I looked into Hugo's face, that it was deadly pale, and thought it strange that he should be so visibly affected by what could only prove to be a provoking error; but, owing to the confusion and bewilderment of my mind, I did not even press his outstretched hand, or murmur one kindly word of farewell.

"*Affaire politique, n'est-ce-pas?*" the Prince asked, turning to one of the two men who had hold of him. I do not know whether he said this really believing it at the time, or whether he desired merely that I should believe it, and be more reassured in consequence. He had often told me that the agents of the Russian Government were perpetually taking up innocent persons, on suspicion of being concerned in imaginary conspiracies, and subjecting them to all kinds of temporary annoyance. We had talked upon this subject quite recently, when commenting upon the mysterious disappearance of Zoubiroff.

But the detective's answer fell upon me like a thunderbolt.

"*Pardon, mon Prince,*" he said, speaking sternly, but in a tone that was perfectly respectful, "*c'est pour un assassinat*"; and then the two detectives escorted their prisoner into the hotel.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE day that followed upon this eventful morning was, I think, one of the most anxious and restless that I ever remember to have passed. I cannot say that it was also the most miserable, because I found it impossible, as yet, to take a serious view of my husband's situation. The words of the detectives had certainly stunned me for the moment, but upon recovering from the first effects of the shock, I began to derive consolation from the very enormity of the charge, which I felt assured must be altogether without foundation. I could not help longing, however, to be convinced of this from Hugo's own lips, or, at least, by a letter from him, and when the posts were all in, and there was still no news, I felt terribly feverish and anxious.

We had lingered on at Monte Carlo, upon the previous day, with our eyes fixed upon the door of the hotel, through which we expected that Hugo would eventually pass out and rejoin us. He did not come, however, and by-and-by we felt the chill which always precedes the sunset upon the Riviera, and knew that it was time for us to take our homeward way. We went into the hotel to collect our cloaks and wraps before departing, but could see no sign of Hugo or of the men who had arrested him, and feeling convinced that the whole thing was merely a provoking blunder, we thought it would be wiser not to call attention to it by asking questions, which might have the effect of associating my husband's name, after everything had been satisfactorily explained, with some unpleasant affair. Fortunately, Sir Harry seemed to have observed nothing. He fancied that the Prince had fallen in with some acquaintances in the gambling-rooms, and

urged us to return before twilight, leaving him to follow us at his own convenience.

And, indeed, during the whole of that evening I was on the alert, listening for his well-known footstep, but the evening had darkened into night without word or sign of him, and now the day that followed had gone by too, and still no news!

Miss Warden, who had always been one of Hugo's warmest admirers, whilst agreeing with me that some sort of foolish comedy of errors was being enacted by the police, which would be cleared up quite satisfactorily in the course of a few days, was much concerned for Hugo's comfort and well-being in the meantime. He had none of his things with him, she said. If we had only known where he was we might, at least, have sent him off his dressing-bag and a few changes of raiment by his servant. It was even possible, she thought, that he might be dragged all the way to Russia in order to be confronted with his accusers. There was no telling, in fact, to what inconveniences he might not be subjected! In our most desponding moments I think that this was really the gloomiest form assumed by our fears—that the Prince might have to take a long and cold journey unprovided with railway-rugs, clean shirts, or ivory hairbrushes.

During the watches of an utterly sleepless night, I had arrived at the conclusion that my husband's arrest must be connected, in some way, with Zoubiroff, and before daybreak I had succeeded in establishing a whole chain of circumstantial evidence in support of my theory.

Zoubiroff, I said to myself, had probably committed some crime, or had associated himself with dynamiters and assassins. I had never liked the man's expression of countenance, and it would not have surprised me in the least to learn that he had turned out to be a thorough scoundrel. He had evidently been arrested in Paris at the time of his mysterious disappearance, and conveyed

to Russia, where it would have been quickly discovered in whose service he had been living. Either Hugo's presence was required at the trial of his servant, or else, through the access which Zoubiroff must have had to many of the papers of his master, something might have been found in his possession which, for the moment, had seemed to implicate the Prince in his valet's conspiracy. The officials who had arrested Hugo at Monte Carlo might have obeyed their instructions without having been made acquainted with all the particulars of the case, and hence they had stupidly associated the master with the crime which had been committed by the servant. Something of this kind had evidently occurred, and knowing nothing whatever of the laws relating to the extradition of political offenders, I made up my mind that the crime, whatever it was, was, of course, an "*affaire politique.*"

Thus, woman-like, I proceeded with my ignorant conjectures, until I had almost persuaded myself of their truth. I told Miss Warden in the morning what conclusion I had arrived at. The same idea, she said, had occurred to her own mind—that the arrest of the Prince was due to his former connection with Zoubiroff. The Prince's papers, she felt sure, would be confiscated by the police. My letters to him, it now occurred to us, would, in all probability, be taken away with the rest of his correspondence. The secret of our marriage, which he might now be desirous of concealing for the present, would be liable to become bruited abroad. I knew that he had preserved several of my letters, if not all that I had ever written to him; and I knew, too, that it was his habit to keep them in a small, locked silver casket, in one of the pockets of his travelling-bag, which used to stand upon the floor, under the dressing-table, in his bedroom. It would be the simplest thing possible, I thought, to go through the box-room, open the travelling-bag, and abstract this casket. Hugo was not accustomed

to lock his bag with a key. It opened with a spring, the secret of which was known to me; and, once I had obtained the letters, I would keep them until my husband's return. All this would be simple enough. It occurred to Miss Warden, however, that once were we in Hugo's bedroom, it might be to his advantage, perhaps, if we removed, likewise, all the loose papers we could lay our hands on; to be returned to him, of course, as soon as this annoying investigation was over, when he could but be grateful to us (we thought) for our promptness of action in preventing his private correspondence from being overhauled by strangers. We decided upon this course at about eleven o'clock in the morning, and went at once into the box-room with the intention of acting upon it. Before trying the handle of the door, however, we thought it prudent to listen, and hearing distinctly footsteps in the inner chamber, we cautiously retraced our own. Hugo's French valet, we concluded—who probably knew nothing of what had occurred—was, no doubt, setting his room in order, in anticipation of his return. It would be wiser for us to wait for another hour, when the servants would all be engaged downstairs with their mid-day meal.

Soon after twelve o'clock we made our second attempt. It was unsuccessful as the first. The door of Hugo's room was locked upon the inside, and when, going round to that which opened upon the now deserted corridor, we mustered courage to try the handle, we found that this door also had been secured. We were baffled; but, upon reflection, could only attribute our disappointment to the praiseworthy caution of Hugo's servant. Whether our marriage was declared just now or not, this man would have, probably, to be taken into our confidence some day. Miss Warden proposed, therefore, that we should send for him, upon some pretext, as soon as he had finished his dinner, and beg him, in the interests of his master, to

assist us now. Acting upon this suggestion, I rang the bell, but was informed by the waiter who answered it that the Prince's valet had left the hotel early in the morning in consequence of a telegram which he had received. We were completely at a loss as to what to do after hearing this; and thinking that it might not be discreet as yet to institute any further inquiries, we could only await with impatience the course of events, hoping and praying for the best.

Next morning, as I was wandering about the public reading-room, like an unquiet spirit, making a pretence of dipping, now and then, into the books and newspapers which were littered about upon the tables, the waiter who was accustomed to serve us in our sitting-room, and who had informed me on the previous day of the departure of the Prince's valet, came towards me, and, bowing respectfully, placed a folded newspaper in my hand. It was a small local weekly journal, still damp from the press, and not thinking at the moment that it could contain anything of particular interest, I unfolded it listlessly, and ran my eyes carelessly over its two coarsely-printed sheets. By-and-by the following paragraph met my bewildered gaze:—

"*Un incident des plus sérieux vient de jeter la consternation dans notre ville*" (I will proceed with the paragraph in English, because, being an Englishwoman, I had to translate it, as it were, mentally, into my native tongue before I could grasp its entire significance), "which might incline us to believe that the well-known axiom, to the effect that the most atrocious murders end by being unveiled and punished, is in a fair way of being verified, in a startling and unexpected fashion, even after the bones of the unhappy victim, undiscovered for years, have become reduced to dust by the hand of Time. *Monsieur le Prince de C* . . . . . , belonging to one of the most ancient and highly-considered families in Poland, *aide-de-camp* to His

Imperial Majesty the Emperor of Russia, a *ci-devant* captain in the *Chevalier Gardes*, &c. &c. &c., and well-known and esteemed in Paris, and in most of the capitals of Europe—finding himself, quite recently, at Monte Carlo, was breakfasting there in company with some ladies, when he was suddenly arrested under their eyes, and accused of a crime of which the details are at once tragical and revolting. We will restrict ourselves, for the present, to these facts, whilst awaiting the further particulars which we expect to receive very shortly from St. Petersburg, whither, it is said, the Prince was immediately conveyed, under the escort of two of the most intelligent agents of the Russian police. Let us hope that the result of the forthcoming investigation may be to reinstate His Highness in the estimation of the public. We will only add, for the benefit of our lady readers, that the accused is young, handsome, accomplished, and a bachelor."

Before I had finished reading, the words had begun to swim before my eyes. What new horror was this—this tale of "unhappy victims," "mouldering bones," "tragical and revolting crime"?

I remained standing with the newspaper in my hand, without any consciousness of the flight of time, till, feeling sick and faint at heart, I staggered to the door with an effort, and made my way, more dead than alive, to our own apartment.

CHAPTER XX.

A WEARY period of suspense followed upon this dreadful day, during which I heard nothing whatever of my husband. I accused Miss Warden of abstracting and hiding away the newspapers, as I was never able to find any further allusion to the paragraph I had already seen. She assured me, however, that she had searched every day for some elucidation of the terrible mystery, but always in vain. If the newspapers referring to the Prince's arrest had been withdrawn from the reading-room, it must have been, she said, by the orders of the landlady, who might not be desirous of calling public attention to the fact that she had so recently harboured a person resting under such a dreadful accusation beneath her roof.

Miss Warden begged me not to cross-question any of the inmates of the hotel, assuring me that if the worst came to the worst—although this she was very far from foreseeing—my chief aim and object in future should be to conceal the fact that I had ever been in any way associated with one who was guilty of such a revolting crime. Only four persons, as yet, had been informed of my marriage: Mr. Collingwood, Miss Warden herself, Mason, and Zoubiroff. Upon *three* of these, at least, I felt that I could confidently rely; and who knew whether Zoubiroff, the only one of the four whose devotion to me was as yet unproved, was even now in the land of the living? Hugo, then, might pass out of my life as entirely as if I had never met with him; and I must endeavour to drive from my mind the remembrance of my brief and unfortunate marriage!

"But, dearest Helen," she would generally conclude by

exclaiming cheerfully, when we had been discussing these gloomy subjects, "surely something must tell you that this is nothing more than a provoking mistake! How could that kind, amiable creature—who wouldn't hurt a fly—have committed a murder? Some day, when you and I are seated here, I feel convinced that the door will suddenly open, and the poor dear Prince will walk in, just as if nothing had happened."

My kind friend intended only to cheer and console; but her words produced upon me, in my nervous and shattered state, a totally opposite effect, and I found myself watching the green velvet *portière*, which shrouded the doorway in painful and agitated expectation.

Did I really desire the return of Hugo at this time? I can scarcely say, even now, when the fleeting years have done so much towards softening the sinister impressions of the past. Of course I most earnestly desired that he should be proved innocent of the charges preferred against him. It was hardly possible, indeed, in my least sanguine moments, whilst remembering his gentle temper — his kind, sad smile—the spiritual and intellectual cast of his mind—to believe that he could have placed himself, by his acts, upon a level with the lowest and most ferocious of criminals. And yet I had, at times, felt as though he was irrevocably separated from me by something mysterious and inexplicable. Why, with all his rare and attractive qualities of mind and person, had I—one of the most impressionable of women—who had longed unconsciously since my earliest childhood for human sympathy and affection, never been (for I recognised this now) wholly and unquestionably in love with him? What sinister influence was that which had seemed to arise—whenever I had felt tempted to surrender myself to the tenderer and warmer emotions—and forbid me at my peril to pour out my whole soul in oblation? Did not this warning voice —or whatever it was—partake, perhaps, of the nature of

a presentiment? and might not some terrible crime — staining indelibly the soul of one of two persons—tend to prevent that perfect sympathy which ought always to exist between a wife and her husband, even supposing that the crime in question was alike unsuspected and undiscovered—before "the bones of the unhappy victim" had been brought to light?

These thoughts, crowding upon me against my will, filled the days with misery and mistrust.

Disloyal as it may appear—after all the proofs which I had received of Hugo's kindness of heart — one terrible conviction haunted me perpetually: the conviction that, through some mysterious combination of circumstances, of which I was altogether ignorant, he was, in truth, guilty of the crime imputed to him. Do what I would, this idea clung tenaciously to my mind; and so, at this miserable period, I think the only real consolation I derived from Miss Warden's hopeful words was inspired by the thought that one day, perhaps, my marriage might be even as though it had never been; and that Hugo himself might become like one of the vague and shadowy creations of a passing nightmare.

It was fortunate for me that my father, being such an invalid, did not observe the change which had taken place in my spirits and appearance. I was not inclined, just now, to pay much attention to such trifles myself, but was made aware that I looked ill and wretched by the anxious attentions of Mason, and by the frequent inquiries respecting my health with which Miss Warden was overwhelmed by the proprietors and visitors of the hotel.

I felt, indeed, an utter prostration of mind and body such as I had never experienced before. The circumstances in which I found myself were, certainly, new to me also, but I had fancied, until all this came to pass, that Providence meted out to us, with our misfortunes, the courage necessary to endure them with fortitude and resignation, and I

despised myself for falling so far short of the heroines of history.

We were beginning now to think of our return journey to England. "The voice of Spring was echoing through the land;" through the beautiful land—that is to say, in which we were sojourning. The violets were over, but hundreds of later blossoms were flowering forth in their stead upon every side. The pink almond-trees were all in bloom, and the tenderer green of young leaves, newly unfurled, contrasted harmoniously with the sombre foliage of the olives, whilst the ruined grottoes in the old garden were almost smothered with white and yellow Banksia roses. The double row of cypress spires which formed our noble avenue towered heavenward to meet the very bluest of blue skies. A long spotted snake glided one morning across my path, to my infinite terror—a certain harbinger, I was informed, of summer—and, gradually, the hotel omnibus conveyed away every British subject, until we were almost the only visitors left in the place.

"The last of the French *chefs* has taken his departure this morning," Miss Warden remarked, shortly after my meeting with the snake; "there were three here when we first came, and no end of *marmitons*. I don't think that your father, in his delicate state, will be satisfied with the talents of a very dirty old Nizzard woman, who has just arrived here, as cook. The head-waiter is going away to-morrow, and the *concierge* the day after. If we don't start next week we shall be driven away, whether we like it or not."

This was no more than the truth. In spite of the delightful weather and the solace afforded to my troubled spirit by the deserted condition of the hotel, the sense that we could no longer abide where we were in peace had become almost atmospheric. The few remaining attendants regarded us with wonder

not unmingled with reproach. The "season" was over, and they were impatient to depart elsewhere. We decided, therefore, to start for England early in the ensuing week.

CHAPTER XXI.

ONE afternoon, a few days before our intended departure, as I was waiting in our sitting-room until the day should become cool enough to go out, I was startled by a sharp knock at the door; the *portière* was flung aside, and a waiter came towards me with a visiting card upon a tray. Some one from the town of Nice, he said, who wished particularly to see me upon business.

My heart began beating violently, and my eyes seemed suddenly to cloud over, so that I found it impossible to read the name upon the card. I connected it instinctively with Hugo. The waiter was a stranger, who did not know him by sight. Perhaps he had returned, as Miss Warden had always foreseen that he would, and, fearing to startle me by his too sudden appearance, had sent up his card to prepare me for his coming.

My emotion, however, was soon dispelled by the waiter. The lady was in her victoria, he said; could I receive her now, or would I have the goodness to appoint some other hour?

So it was only a "lady" after all! Yes; certainly. I would receive her now. I begged the waiter to show her up at once.

My heart ceased its tumultuous beating, and my eyes recovered from their blindness. I looked at the name on

the card, and read—not without some return of my former emotion—

"MRS. MARKS,

Hôtel des Anglais."

I had not got over my astonishment when the door opened, and the waiter ushered in this unexpected visitor. I saw before me a tall, well-dressed woman, with an unmistakeably Hebrew cast of countenance, but of a refined and intellectual character, altogether unlike the vulgar, sensual types which are sometimes seen amongst the lower orders of this remarkable people. Her face was thin and haggard, and her large clear-cut black eyes were surrounded by dark circles. She was breathing hard from the exertion of coming up stairs. Hugo had told me that Mrs. Marks was in very delicate health, and she certainly looked like an invalid.

I motioned her to a chair, and as soon as I could recover my voice, begged to be allowed to help her off with her cloak, which was very heavy, considering the heat of the weather. She unfastened it at the throat, and flung it carelessly on to the sofa. I observed—being in that dazed and bewildered state when, oddly enough, trifling details seem to rivet one—that she was what would be termed "very handsomely dressed," *too* handsomely, I thought, for an ordinary afternoon visit. I was conscious of a good deal of ruby velvet, richly trimmed with black lace and jet, and of a diamond brooch which twinkled in the sunlight. On her arm she carried a small bag with a silver clasp.

"I hope I'm not intruding," she began, as soon as she had recovered her breath. "I am come upon very particular business—indeed, and as I am not at all in good health—my chest is delicate—I had to wait for one of my favourable days, and was unable, therefore, to make an appointment beforehand. Besides which, I was not going

to trust anything to paper, as what I have to say is quite private and confidential. Have I the pleasure of speaking to the Princess?"

Her words, uttered in a high and somewhat metallic voice, were altogether a surprise to me. I had realised—in spite of my bewilderment—as soon as I read the name of my visitor, that this must be the wife of that Mr. Marks, who had taken Hugo's place in Poland upon a lease, and who was said to be desirous of eventually purchasing it "out and out." My husband had told me that she was passing the winter at Nice, and it was even strange, perhaps—as she was a person of somewhat showy appearance—that I had never seen her before. But what could this woman, whether she was the wife of Mr. Marks or not, know of my private history, and of the marriage that I was each day more anxious to keep a profound secret?

Before I could reply to her question she continued—

"I haven't alluded to your husband by name, because I wish to be extra discreet, but you will know whom I mean if you are the lady I take you for. You may have heard that Mr. Marks—my husband—has lately rented the house and property of a certain Prince, in Poland, and that he has been residing there recently?"

I murmured something to the effect that I had already heard this.

"Then," said my visitor, "you're the lady that I wanted to see. Now, I daresay you wonder how I came to hear of your marriage?"

"Yes," I answered faintly, "we did not want any one to hear of it yet; I am surprised at your knowing."

"You look so delicate," said Mrs. Marks, "that I'm afraid of upsetting you if I tell you too much; but it must all come out sooner or later. In the meantime, I have a letter for you."

"From my husband?" I gasped, overwhelmed by emotions too complex for me to attempt to describe.

"No," replied my visitor, who was now searching in the depths of her hand-bag, "the letter is not from the Prince—I don't expect he will have permission to write for some time—but it's a letter I have been asked to deliver into your hands. Mr. Marks promised the writer that it should reach you as soon as possible. I hope it won't give you a shock."

I assured her that suspense was agony to me, and that I would rather hear the worst than remain a moment longer in my present state of miserable ignorance.

Mrs. Marks hereupon handed me a letter sealed untidily with red wax. I looked anxiously at the direction: "To the Respected and Honourable Miss Davenant." The handwriting was evidently that of a foreigner. It was small, cramped, and entirely unfamiliar to me. With trembling fingers I broke the seal, and read as follows:

"HONOURABLE AND RESPECTED LADY,

"Being, in the first instance, accused of complicity in the affair which has now become transferred entirely to the Prince, my former master—in consequence of some body-clothing which he had given me, long since, having been discovered in my apartments in Paris, and which had upon them, unhappily, some evidences of the unfortunate catastrophe—I was arrested some months ago, and interrogated by the police. My private correspondence, all my papers, &c., &c., fell also into their hands, and through this circumstance they were enabled, in the course of their interrogations, to lead me to suppose that they knew already all the details connected with the murder; and also that *Monsieur le Prince* was married. I should have divulged none of the particulars connected with these two occurrences if I had not supposed that *Monsieur le Prince's* accusers were already in possession of the chief facts; and so I am sending you, madame, this letter with my profoundest respect, to assure you that

you can retain the confidence you so graciously reposed in me, and which it has always been my endeavour to merit; and that, kissing your hands, I beg leave to remain, with humble and respectful duty, your highness's faithful and obedient servant,

"ZOUBIROFF.

"(Formerly *valet-de-chambre* to *Monsieur le Prince de C.*)"

After reading this letter I was even more painfully bewildered than before.

"I'm afraid I've upset you dreadfully," I heard Mrs. Marks saying—when I could hear at all—"but, you see, my husband promised this man that his letter should reach you. It was difficult enough to get him permission to write, as he is still under arrest. With Russian officials, however, money works wonders."

"I can understand nothing," I said, at last; "I have been told nothing. Why am I left in this miserable state of suspense? What has happened? Of what is my husband accused? Where have they taken him to? I implore you to tell me everything you know; however dreadful it may be; I have a right to hear it!"

I suppose that, without meaning it—for no woman could have felt more humbled and abased than I did—I had assumed a tone of authority, having become emboldened by despair. Mrs. Marks seemed as if she was about to comply with my entreaty. She coughed nervously, and shifted the position of her hand-bag. My perceptions appeared to have become quickened by misery. I fancied that I perceived the reason of her hesitation.

"You think," I said, "judging very likely by your own feelings towards Mr. Marks, that I care so much for my husband that it would kill me to hear anything against him. But no! I can assure you it is this suspense, this

terrible mystery, that is slowly killing me! If I look ill, this is the reason; I was always very strong before. Indeed, indeed, I would far rather that you told me everything!"

But Mrs. Marks still hesitated.

"I have received no authorisation from Mr. Marks to do more than give you this letter with my own hands," she said, "and this I have done. I can't say whether my husband is aware that you know so little. Perhaps he may think it better that you should remain in ignorance until after the trial. You look scarcely strong enough at present to stand a shock. However, if you wish it, I will communicate with Mr. Marks, and ask his permission to tell you all I know."

"But Mr. Marks is in Poland, or in Russia," I exclaimed, in despair, "a letter will take such a long time reaching him, and his answer is sure to arrive after we have started for England!"

"Then I can telegraph," said Mrs. Marks, an expression of pity coming into her somewhat hard eyes, "and if he answers 'yes,' I can call again and tell you the whole story. It's a regular case of 'murder will out.'"

"Oh, thank you! thank you!" I cried, overcome with gratitude. It seemed to me, at the moment, as if this woman had granted me some long-sought favour.

Mrs. Marks readjusted the clasp of her bag, and rose to depart. I helped her on with her cloak like one in a dream. As she bade me good-bye, it occurred to me that, but for my having become aware that Zoubiroff had been concerned in Hugo's accusation, I knew no more than I did before.

"Tell me one thing before you go," I said, therefore; "do not be afraid that you will do me harm. Of what is my husband accused, and who are his accusers? I was near him when he was arrested, and I heard him say to the man who had hold of him that he supposed he was

taken up for a political crime. The man answered, No, —that it was for '*un assassinat*'—a murder. But there are many different kinds of murder. I think now that he must have become mixed up in a plot to get rid of some public person—some tyrant, perhaps—from a wish to benefit mankind, even at the risk of his own life. This would be a murder, of course, if he had really planned any one's death. But, however mistaken, however guilty he may be, this would not seem to me quite like a common murder. Men have done such things, sometimes, from the highest motives."

Whilst I was speaking I had worked myself up to believe that my present conjecture was the true one. Our feelings are greatly influenced by comparison; and when contrasted with my previous emotions of horror and repulsion, I regarded Hugo now as almost an innocent and injured man.

But I was destined to have my illusion rudely dispelled.

"I would much rather have waited until I had heard from St. Petersburg," Mrs. Marks said; "but, as you seem so anxious to know the worst, it may be cruel to keep you any longer in suspense, for you *must* hear all about it later on. I can assure you, my dear madam, that it wasn't a murder with anything fine about it! My husband is your husband's accuser. The Prince murdered Mr. Marks' only brother very nearly fourteen years ago, who had, unfortunately for himself, married your husband's sister—Madame Dobrowolska—one of the worst women in the world; and, if there was any motive for the crime, beyond cruelty and family pride, it must have been done for money, as the poor victim had just taken a large sum out of the bank with the view, it was said, of purchasing an Italian title, and none of this money has ever been heard of since. I can quite believe that you can't care much about such a fellow; still, it's all very

distressing for you. Mr. Marks only took the place in Poland in order to try and discover his brother's body, which he had beheld in a dream, all covered over with rubbish, in a cellar."

CHAPTER XXII.

I WILL not attempt to describe my feelings after the departure of my unexpected visitor. I could not have done so at the moment, and now that Time, the great physician, has partly healed

"The wounds that others strove to bind in vain,"

I would rather not dwell, more than will be necessary for my story, upon my past sufferings.

The reply to the telegram sent by Mrs. Marks came sooner than I expected. She received her husband's permission to tell me everything. He advised me, however, for my own sake, to behave as if I knew nothing until after the conclusion of the Prince's trial. He promised also, at my request, which reached him through his wife, not to call attention to the subject of my marriage, which could in no way influence the ends of justice, and that if, in the course of the proceedings, it should be brought to light, to furnish no clue which might lead to my identification as the wife of the accused. These assurances were not all conveyed to me within the narrow compass of a telegram.

A letter to Mrs. Marks followed upon her husband's message. She read me passages from it upon the occasion of

her next visit, and I was favourably impressed by the writer's apparent consideration for my feelings.

It was during this visit that she revealed to me the circumstances which had led to the Prince's arrest.

I did not learn, however, until later, many of the minuter, though not less important, details, but it is difficult for me to remember, now, the precise order in which they were brought to my knowledge.

To avoid confusion, therefore, I will simply set down a history of the facts, and to this end it will be necessary for me to revert to a period when Hugo Crecszoleski's existence was utterly unknown to me; when he was, in fact, a young man of barely nineteen, living in a far-off land, and when I was a little girl of only four or five, beloved, at that time, of tender parents, inhabiting the dear old nursery at Northover Park.

How strange, how fascinating, would have been the notion, to a romantic and imaginative child, such as I soon came to be, that some being, with whom I had never yet been brought into personal contact, was waiting, waiting—in his ancestral castle—for the irresistible influence which was first to launch him on his way towards me, in obedience to the irrevocable decree which went forth at the very beginning! How I should have thought about this beautiful foreign Prince whilst I was playing with my bricks upon the nursery floor, and dreamed of him as I lay at night sleeping in my little cane-sided cot, and with what curiosity and impatience should I not have looked forward to the moment when the days of probation should be over-passed, and when he would stand before me in the flesh and claim me for his bride!

Alas! with all the materials, as it seemed, which usually go to the making of a happily-ending romance, to what had my existence now turned! To one of shame, disappointment, and humiliation! The man I had sworn at the altar to love, honour, and obey, was now a prisoner,

accused of a horrible crime; and were his innocence to be proclaimed, now, from the house-tops of every city in Europe, I could not be quite certain that, after the terrible shock I had received, he would ever occupy his former place in my esteem. Our affections, like our beliefs, are not entirely under our own control; and suspicion and mistrust, once they have thrust their way, uninvited, into the human heart, are not very easily exorcised. When a person we have esteemed and respected suddenly presents himself before us in an utterly unfamiliar aspect, the very constancy of our nature seems to compel us to repudiate him, in order that we may remain faithful to our previous impression. To care at all for this unexpected new-comer would seem like an infidelity to the man who is now no more. But to proceed with my story.

Some years previous to the time to which I have just alluded—the time when Hugo was only a youth, and I little more than a baby—there lived in the Jewish quarter of a foreign city two brothers, named Bernhardt, the sons of a wealthy and respectable merchant of the Hebrew persuasion. The brothers were twins, and from their earliest years the deepest attachment had existed between them. During their boyhood they had scarcely ever been separated, having been educated by a learned rabbi under the paternal roof; but, as they advanced in wisdom and in years, their father exhorted them to make a choice of a profession. Mark—the elder of the two, as far as it is possible for a twin to claim primogeniture—elected to follow his father's example and embark in commerce; whilst Maurice, the younger one, who was of a more scientific and enquiring turn of mind, devoted himself to the study of medicine and philosophy. Upon the death of their father, his large fortune was equally divided between them, and as at about this time the Hebrew population of their native town began to be subjected to all kinds of annoyances and oppressions, they resolved to

separate for the first time and to pursue their different callings elsewhere—in some place where their property and their liberties would be likely to be more secure.

When, however, the time for their separation drew near, both the young men fell a prey to an unaccountable melancholy. As is sometimes the case with twins, so intense was the sympathy existing between them that they often experienced sensations which were identical. There had come to them, likewise, from their fathers, something which was nearly allied to the gift of prophecy, a vague consciousness of what, to most people, lay still shrouded in the obscurity of the future, and which had asserted itself more than once upon important or critical occasions. Hence both Mark and Maurice were alarmed at their own sadness, each feeling apprehensive for the safety of the other. Finally, however, the voices of reason and of worldly wisdom triumphed over these vague fears. Some cousins of their father had long been established in London as merchants and financiers. Mark, who had been named after the head of this family, had been invited to enter into partnership with them, and had devoted himself, in consequence, to the study of English. The opening was altogether too advantageous for the young man to refuse. Like another Abraham, therefore, he departed from his native land. He went straight to London, where he eventually married one of his English cousins—the lady from whom I learnt nearly all these details—became a naturalised British subject, and in a comparatively short time acquired a vast fortune.

Almost every year he made projects for revisiting his native country, and the brother to whom he remained tenderly attached. But, somehow, these projects seemed doomed to be invariably thwarted. Sometimes it was his business that stood in the way of his plans; or else his health, or that of his wife, rendered the undertaking of a long journey out of the question. Then, again, Maurice

had written, upon one occasion, that it was his intention to come to England to visit Mark. This visit, also, was destined never to take place. Maurice decided, instead of it, to make a tour in India; and this tour, planned, in the first instance, to last for only a few months, was prolonged as it happened, for very nearly two years. In a word, strange as this may appear to those who have not realised the mutability of all human intentions, twenty-five years elapsed since these devoted brothers had unwillingly torn themselves apart, during which time they never once beheld each other. Days, weeks, and months seemed to fly past so quickly. Life in London, particularly a business life, is so full of care and responsibility! When Mark looked back upon the years that had gone by since he first came to England, they seemed to him to have been scarcely longer than the same number of weeks!

The career of Maurice, in the meanwhile, had not been less successful. Unlike his brother, he had decided not to quit the land of his birth. He had migrated, however, to another town, where his religious opinions were not known, and where, whilst remaining faithfully attached to the traditions of his race, he refrained, from political and prudential motives, from identifying himself with the Jewish community. The name of Doctor Maurice Bernard — for now he had discarded the original manner of spelling his name, as calculated to recall his Hebrew descent—soon became famous in medicine. But he devoted himself, also, to more recondite mysteries. He had studied mesmerism as a curative agent, and had thoroughly familiarised himself with the physical and mental phenomena which it is capable of producing.

His own peculiar faculty of "pre-vision," as Mrs. Marks called the prophetic power of which he was still conscious from time to time, attracted him to the study of clairvoyance in all its strange developments, whence he was led to the investigation of spiritualism in its various forms.

He had even made experiments in black and white magic, and had constructed a laboratory in order to discover whether the alchemists' dream of transmuting the imperfect metals to gold possessed aught of truth in it or no. In the Middle Ages it is quite possible that Dr. Bernard's taste for the occult might have brought him to the stake; but in these more enlightened days his reputation for mystic learning, combined with his irreproachable moral character, earned for him the respect and admiration of his friends, whilst distinguished strangers, from all parts of the world, who were interested in the same subjects as he was, were in the habit of thronging to consult him upon the strange matters with which he had rendered himself familiar.

When Mrs. Marks had arrived at this point in her narrative she paused, as though uncertain as to whether she ought to go on with it.

"I now come to the time," she said, "when Dr. Bernard first met with the Prince, your husband. Can you bear to hear my story to the end?"

I assured her that, in my present state of hopelessness and despair, nothing could well add to my misery, and that I would far rather know the whole truth, in order that I might consider what I had better do.

Thus encouraged, my visitor proceeded with her story, which I will endeavour to set down, as far as I can remember, in her own words.

"Prince Crecszoleski," she said, "was living quite alone at this time, his sister having been lately married to a Polish General. I believe he had just entered the army, but being a young man of very studious habits, who had inherited a large estate and a fine fortune, he was enabled to obtain a good deal of leave from time to time, which he spent in prosecuting all sorts of odd spiritualistic inquiries. He was interested in the same subjects as Dr. Maurice Bernard, and soon became one of his most enthusiastic

pupils. The town at which the doctor now resided was not more than a few hours' journey from Prince Crecszoleski's country house, so that he was enabled to pay frequent visits to the laboratory. The two enthusiasts became, apparently, the closest friends, and the doctor used to stay for weeks together at the Prince's place, a large, rambling, ill-kept barrack, from all I have heard, but just the very spot, from the loneliness and seclusion of its situation, for the investigation of secret mysteries. After a while, the two friends decided to visit India, the Prince obtaining from the Emperor permission to travel, in order to complete his scientific and philosophical studies, on condition that he should return at once to his military duties, should hostilities break out between Russia and any other Power. During this time my husband heard very seldom from his brother. From what has since come to his knowledge, however, through Zoubiroff, the Prince's servant, who accompanied them, they seem to have gone through all sorts of hardships and privations, fasting and abstaining from drinking even water, at times, in order that they might share the ecstacies and marvellous experiences of the wonderful Indian mystics and ascetics. They remained in India for nearly two years, and after their return the doctor's letters to his brother were all dated from the Prince's *château*. The two seemed, in fact, to have become almost inseparable. But it turned out that there was another attraction for the doctor besides the society of his pupil. The Prince's only sister, having been recently left a widow, came to spend the first year of her mourning in the seclusion of her old home. She was a good deal older than her brother, who was not more than twenty at this time, and had always possessed great influence over him. If there are ever, now, such creatures as witches, I verily believe this woman must have been one of them! She seems to have been able to cast her spells over a man in a minute!

"Dr. Bernard, who had never looked at a woman before, as far as we knew, fell almost immediately in love with her. My husband soon discovered from his letters that some new and disturbing influence was at work, but little thought, at this time, how matters would end. I suppose that she must have been wonderfully handsome. She could not, then, have been more than thirty, and Mr. Marks, who saw her quite lately in Paris, says that she is wonderfully handsome still.

"How and when Dr. Bernard's marriage with this wicked woman took place we never knew for certain. As far as we can make out, it must have been about a year from this time. Some may wonder, perhaps, why this lady—young, beautiful, and accustomed to the society of persons altogether different from this steady and serious professor—should have consented so soon to re-marry. We cannot say what may have been her private reasons, but we have heard since that, during the life-time of her former husband, who was quite an old man, and allowed her her way like a spoilt child, she had led an existence of great extravagance and dissipation in Paris, where she was surrounded by flatterers and admirers. The character she bore there was none of the best, and we were informed (for my husband left no stone unturned in order to discover all about her) that the man she had set her heart on—a person in a very good position—did not come forward to marry her, as she had expected, as soon as she became a widow. Disappointed, perhaps, at this, she may have married the doctor out of pique. Or, had he discovered, during his travels in India, some way of making people fall in with his wishes through the aid of magical spells?

"Perhaps the simplest explanation may be that Dr. Bernard had become extremely wealthy, and that rumour made him out even richer than he really was; for, with the shrewd business habits peculiar to his race, he had not

neglected his worldly interests whilst occupying himself with spiritual affairs. Mr. Marks has heard, too, that the lady was a confirmed gambler, and very deeply in debt, and he thinks that she may not have liked to make any further calls upon her brother, who had already paid away large sums for her. We have found out that, previous to the marriage, she had borrowed money from the doctor. Be this as it may, in an evil hour they were married . . .

"Why did not Dr. Bernard's prophetic instinct warn him against so rash an act? He was in love. I suppose this accounts for his infatuation; and in love, too, I verily believe, with a sorceress, who must have been in league with the Prince of devils. The doctor did not avow his marriage for some time; telling us afterwards, for excuse, first, that the lady had married him unknown to her brother, and that, hence, he had not deemed it right to inform his own relatives until he had confided in those of his wife; and then, when Mr. Marks at length knew all, the doctor desired that he would not reveal his kinship until he had broken to his wife the secret of his true origin. This he had not yet ventured to do, as the Jews were despised and execrated throughout the dominions of the Czar. In a little while, he said, he should inform her from what race he sprung, as it was not his intention to separate himself from his own people.

"So about two years went by, and then, quite indirectly, it came to our ears that the learned Dr. Maurice Bernard was no more. My husband, deeply afflicted at the news, immediately set about collecting all the information he could relating to the manner of his brother's death, and to the disposal of his body, which he feared might not have been interred in accordance with the Jewish ceremonial. He was ignorant as to whether Dr. Bernard had, previous to his death, revealed his race and religion to his wife, and he felt it necessary, therefore, to proceed with the greatest caution. He thought that he might

possibly learn more, under the circumstances, if he abstained from making his inquiries in person, and finally decided to send off to Poland a trusty and confidential agent, a member of the legal profession, of the same persuasion, and, originally, of the same nationality, as himself, and who was conversant, therefore, with the language of the country, and with the law, as it was applied to the property of deceased Hebrews. This gentleman was to find out, in the first instance, if Dr. Bernard had been buried according to Jewish or Christian rites, whence we should be able to discover whether he had avowed the faith of his fathers or passed away as a renegade. As it turned out, however, there seemed to have been no body to bury! My husband's emissary returned with the following strange story:—

"Dr. Bernard, so he had been informed, went out one day upon a wolf-hunt, accompanied by the Prince, his brother-in-law, with whom he appeared to be upon the best of terms. In the course of the afternoon the two hunters became separated. The weather was intensely cold, and the Prince, failing to obtain any answer to his shouts, was supposed to have come to the conclusion that the doctor had returned to the *château*. He was not there, however, and the search that was made for him as soon as day dawned, upon the following morning, had proved unsuccessful. A week passed, and, as he did not appear, his wife and her brother began to apprehend the worst. The spacious forests surrounding the castle were infested by wolves, and it was more than probable that the doctor had been attacked and overpowered by these ferocious animals, rendered desperate by hunger. His gun, battered and blood-stained, as though it had been used in self-defence, was said to have been eventually discovered in one of the most secluded recesses of the forest, together with a few tattered shreds of his hunting-coat and some bones. The snow, however, had fallen in large quantities

since the day of his disappearance. When it melted, further discoveries might be made, but there could be no doubt whatever but that the doctor was dead, for, had he been still alive, he would most certainly have returned to his wife, to whom he was represented as having been devotedly attached, and to whom he had bequeathed all his property.

"With this strange story my husband's emissary had to content himself. There seemed, indeed, nothing more to be said. Mr. Marks, however, was not so well satisfied. Do what he would, he could not banish from his mind the notion that his brother had been the victim of foul play. And yet, what could he do? For a member of our community to level accusations, in the absence of direct proof, at a powerful scion of the aristocracy, could be productive of nothing but disappointment in a country where the greatest hostility prevailed towards the Hebrew race. After thinking the matter over, therefore, my husband decided that he could do nothing but wait in patience for any fuller revelation which might be vouchsafed to him, whilst keeping himself informed, through a faithful old servant of his family, who still lived in the city of his birth, of the movements of Prince Crecszoleski and his sister."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"And now," said Mrs. Marks, "before I go on I must inform you of a circumstance which happened many years before; something that will make you fancy, I'm afraid, that we're a people plunged in all sorts of ignorant super-

stitions! I feel bound to allude to it, however, on account of the strange events which followed upon what seemed, at first, to be a thing of no consequence. The destruction of Bithar, however, as we Jews are taught to believe, all came from merely pulling up a young cedar tree!

"When the twin brothers parted for the first time, each one presented the other with a gift—a talisman, supposed to be endowed with all kinds of extraordinary virtues, and which was always to be worn upon the person as a protection from harm. I don't suppose you know anything about the teaching of our rabbins or of the old legends which are to be found in the Talmud? One of these tells of the adventures of King Solomon the Wise with Aschmedai, the Prince of devils. The king is said to have been much tormented by this evil spirit, who, assuming his own likeness, even penetrated to the apartments of his wives, keeping on his slippers, however, in order that they might not see that his feet, in common with those of all devils, were like the feet of cocks. Solomon, however, was himself a magician, and was finally enabled to overcome and defy the demon. This victory he achieved partly by the aid of charms and incantations, and partly by the wearing of amulets upon which some of the great magical names were engraved, and which were said to preserve their possessors, as well, from the malice of evil-minded men. Two of these very amulets, worn once upon the person of Solomon the King —or so, at least, my husband and his brother believed— had descended as heirlooms in their family, and had been worn and treasured by their forefathers from generation to generation. Each of the young men became possessed of one of these charms at the death of their father, and these, at parting, they exchanged one with the other, vowing that they should never leave their persons as long as they lived. The talisman that passed thus to Mr. Marks consisted of a three-cornered piece of bloodstone,

engraved upon one side with mystic characters, the meaning of which we have never been able to ascertain and having, upon the other side, numbers which are supposed to correspond to one of the texts of the Babylonian Talmud before it was arranged under the six 'classes' or 'orders' by the Rabbi Juda. This talisman, being too large for a ring, had been put into a case, and mounted with thick gold chains, in order that it might be worn as a bracelet. It has never left my husband's arm since I have known him. When he dies I am to take it off, if I survive him, which is not very likely, and give it to our eldest son. Before all this was explained to me I fancied that it must have been a keepsake from some woman! . . .

"Dr. Bernard's talisman, it seems, was almost exactly like that worn by his brother, except that it was larger, and had upon it a somewhat longer inscription. It consisted, likewise, of an engraved piece of bloodstone, enclosed in an outer case, and mounted on chains which were long enough to go round the neck, and it was as a necklace that the doctor used always to wear it, hidden away under his clothes, so that it might not be observed.

"Now, when my husband sent to Poland to discover all that he could respecting his brother's death, he gave instructions to his agent to make particular inquiries about this talisman. He begged him to inform Prince Crecszoleski and his sister that it was a family heirloom, and requested that if found it might be delivered to his messenger, so that one relic, at least, of his departed brother might pass into his possession. In reply to these inquiries, Madame Bernard stated that she had seen the ornament in question, and knew that the doctor was in the habit of wearing it. It must have been upon him when he was attacked by the wolves, and might possibly be recovered when the weather enabled the keepers to make a more effectual search in the forest. If so, it

should be forwarded at once to my husband's agent in London.

"The loss of this family relic was quite a blow to Mr. Marks. (I call him by this name because—about two years after the doctor's disappearance—my father died, and, upon succeeding to his business, my husband dropped his former name, and traded forthwith under the name of Marks.) He seemed unable to recover his spirits, and as, just at this time (for misfortunes never come singly) we lost our eldest son, he began to fancy that some sort of ill-luck had fallen upon us. All the same, he went on making money, and nothing could have prospered more than did his worldly affairs. So several years went by, I doing my very best to cheer him and to divert his thoughts. We had another boy born to us, and I hoped that my husband was getting over his distress about his brother's death and the loss of the amulet, when the whole thing cropped up again in the most extraordinary manner possible.

My husband, you must know, is a collector of *bric-à-brac*. Our private house at Bayswater is full of the most lovely things; worth a whole mint of money, they say, and he seldom passes a curiosity shop, however small and dirty, without stopping and looking in at the window. One evening, a little more than a year ago, as he was on his way home from the City, he happened to pause in front of a pawnbroker's shop at which he had occasionally made purchases. It was winter time, the lamps were alight inside, and almost the first object he beheld, lying in a tray amongst other odds and ends of jewelry, was the amulet which had belonged to his departed brother!

At first he could hardly believe his eyes. To make quite sure he put on his glasses, and peered so anxiously in at the window that the proprietor, recognising him, came out and invited him in to take a look round. It was his brother's amulet sure enough, and save that the

chains which formed the necklace had apparently been wrenched away from the rings to which they had been attached, it was in perfect order, not looking at all like anything which might have been torn and worried by wolves!

"Mr. Marks left the shop with his treasure, but not before he had obtained all the information he could respecting it. It had been pledged by a woman, he was informed by the pawnbroker, who had visited the shop upon several occasions; but it was now what was termed 'out of date,' and he had not seen the woman for several years. She had pledged the necklace in the name of 'Schmidt,' which had been duly set down in the book. As this book was examined every day by the police, however, it was very unlikely that she had given her real name. It was much more usual, the man said, to give a false one, even in cases where the goods belonged lawfully to the persons who pledged them. The woman was a foreigner—French, the pawnbroker fancied—tall, dark, and showy-looking; he would be able to swear to her again anywhere.

"My husband was deeply affected by this unexpected recovery of the relic. As he held it in his hand, and looked at it earnestly, he felt as though he were brought *en rapport*, in some mysterious manner, with his brother's spirit, and again he became imbued with the conviction that he had been brought to his death by foul play.

"That same night, before retiring to rest, he repaired the broken chains, and placed the amulet round his neck, so that the case in which the agate was enclosed came just over his heart. He prayed fervently that some definite revelation might come to him, and then fell asleep, with the consciousness that he was not alone.

"In the course of the night he had a most wonderful dream, absolutely unlike any other he had ever dreamed. It was more like a vision than a dream, for he assured me

that, during the whole of the manifestation, he could see many of the objects in his room quite distinctly, whilst in the midst of it a scene presented itself like a picture, rising, as it were, out of smoke, and that, hence, he was quite certain that he was wide awake.

"He beheld before him what looked like a recess in a subterranean vault, or cellar, of some ancient building. Wine-casks were stowed away here and there, and through a low Gothic arch he could see what looked like the red glare from a furnace. The floor was of dark earth, firmly trodden, and did not seen to be paved.

"Close to the foot of a protruding buttress two men appeared to be engaged in a death-struggle. One of them was being pinioned to the ground by the other, and in the prostrate figure Mr. Marks instantly recognised his brother, in spite of a long dark beard, which was new to him. The eyes and eye-brows, however, were too characteristic for him to be mistaken in them, and these eyes seemed to be turned towards him in mute and agonised appeal. Overwhelmed with the horror of the scene, my husband gazed on in helpless misery, clutching at the bed-clothes with his hands. By-and-by an inspiration came to him, to observe with attention the dress, figure, and face of his brother's assailant, in order that he might be able to identify him in the future. He was a tall, handsome, actively-built young man, with a very remarkable countenance. The features were regular, the teeth even and white, and the eyes, which were large and brilliant, with dark brows and lashes, had a very peculiar expression, as of mingled sadness and tenacity of purpose, not at all the eyes one would naturally have associated with the mind of a murderer. Mr. Marks next turned his attention to the young man's dress. This consisted of a rough loose coat, or blouse, of the shape of what is called in England a Norfolk jacket. It seemed to be made of some sort of frieze, or solid woollen material,

of a lightish colour, but having upon it stripes or checks of a darker shade. It was double-breasted, and fastened with large metal buttons, having upon them initials, or some kind of interlaced design, and was confined round the waist by a belt. He wore also boots of brown untanned leather, reaching high up on the thighs, and a close-fitting skull-cap of dark fur, which was pushed far back so as to expose the whole of his broad, low forehead. A hunting-knife was hanging from his belt, but he had no weapon of any sort in his hands. He held Dr. Bernard's throat in what seemed like a grip of iron, who, upon his side, was clutching with one hand at the breast of his assailant's coat, whilst with the other he strove to disengage the murderous hands that were about his neck.

"As is always the case in dreams and visions, what takes long to describe was made manifest in only a few seconds. To my husband, however, the struggle seemed to continue for hours. Then gradually the light from the furnace became obscured, and a female figure appeared suddenly, looking black and featureless against the glowing background. She sprang forward and stood over the combatants. Her back was towards my husband, so that he could not see her face. She drew some kind of weapon, a long bodkin, or stiletto, from her hair, a tress of which, becoming unbound, fell over her shoulder and reached down below her waist. She bent forward towards the prostrate figure; then, turning to the younger man, spoke to him hurriedly. Acting, apparently, upon her suggestion, he thrust one of his hands violently into the breast of his victim's coat, and drew out something that glittered and clung round his fingers. It was the amulet of Solomon the King, the talisman which was said to protect its wearer from the malice of man and devil alike! The young man, kneeling now upon the doctor's prostrate form, thrust the talisman hastily into one of the pockets of his hunting-

coat. The woman crouched down still nearer to the doctor, and lifted her weapon as though about to strike. Then, suddenly, against the pink glow of the furnace, another figure became visible, a woman also, and she, too, came forward. There arose, then, from the old vaults a sound as of the mocking laughter of fiends, and the vision grew gradually fainter and more confused. My husband stared at it with all his eyes, but something like a sea of blood seemed to rise and engulph the figures he had so lately beheld. By-and-by this was obscured by a bluish vapour, and when this cleared away he saw that the vision had entirely vanished!

"But his terrible experiences were not yet over. Before he had recovered from the effects of this first vision he again fell into a clairvoyant state and a second presented itself. He beheld again the same cellar or vault, which looked even darker and gloomier than before, as no red glow appeared through the Gothic archway, and a sepulchral odour of mould and decay seemed to pervade the atmosphere. A feeble light shone dimly upon the damp walls. This proceeded from a lantern which a man was holding.

"My husband at once recognised the same man whom he had seen bending over his brother's prostrate figure in the former vision, although his dress was altogether different, and his face older, thinner, and more careworn. He was deadly pale and his limbs trembled. A woman was at his side whispering words of encouragement, but, as in the previous manifestation, Mr. Marks could not discern her face. Sometimes she placed her hand soothingly upon her companion's shoulder. The hand was white, beautifully formed, and glittering with rings. Also my husband perceived that, although plainly attired in other respects, she wore emerald ear-rings, pear-shaped, and of remarkable size, whilst an ornament of the same description fastened the black lace mantilla which she

wore over her fair hair. The two bent down and commenced clearing away a mass of confused rubbish, planks, shavings, broken bottles, casks and cinders. They both worked together at this task. My husband, who declares that he was wide awake, stared on into the half-darkness. Presently a sound as of a stifled groan reached his ears, and the man, dropping his shovel, reeled back like one drunk. The woman opened her arms to support him, moving somewhat to the right, so that Mr. Marks could perceive what her form had previously concealed. By the light of a lantern which was set down hard by, a ghastly human face was revealed in the centre of the rubbish-heap; the face of one long dead, but which by some strange chance had not yet become distorted beyond recognition, for a white film-like mildew which had grown over the sunken features appeared, whilst concealing the more shocking evidences of decay, to have preserved their original outline intact. The hollow cavities opening upwards with all the eloquence of eyes, were over-shadowed by the black-beetle brows so painfully familiar to my husband, and the dark beard still clung to the dead man's chin. In a word, there was no mistaking the face of Doctor Bernard, in spite of the ravages which had been wrought by death and time. Mr. Marks perceived that the living man of his vision appeared to share his own agony at sight of the dead man's face. Again the woman seemed to be urging him to take courage. She waved her white hand towards a spot some few feet from where they stood. My husband looked in this direction, and saw an open grave, dug in the black earth of the cellar. No doubt, he thought, they were about to bury his brother's body where it would be less likely to be discovered. To hide the spot where the earth had been disturbed they would pile over this secret grave the ashes and rubbish beneath which the corpse had previously lain concealed. Fearful lest this manifestation, like the previous one, should

suddenly vanish, my husband, in spite of his horror, concentrated his powers of observation upon this open grave, in order that he might be enabled to discover it should fate ever direct his footsteps to any such gloomy vault. It was fortunate for his purpose that he did this, for, in another second, the blue vapour again rose before his eyes, revealing, when it rolled gradually away, the familiar furniture of his room at Bayswater.

"He fell back upon his pillow, exhausted by his terrible experiences. As he did not appear at breakfast, I went upstairs in search of him. I found him sitting up in his bed in a terrible state of agitation, and seeming, to my eyes, to have aged by at least ten years in that one night.

"'Bring me pens, ink and paper, Rebecca,' he said, 'lest I die before I can set down what God has just seen good to reveal to me.'

"Greatly alarmed, I did as he desired me, and brought the writing materials to his bedside. He was muttering to himself, as though unconscious of my presence.

"'They have buried him,' he was saying, 'as one might bury a swine, or some unclean animal! Where was the Taleth—the Robe of Atonement? But it will be for me to enshroud him as beseems; to bind the phylacteries round his head and his wrists; to perform over his murdered body the sacred Jewish rites! It was for this that the vision was made manifest to me, and in order that he might be avenged!' Then he added, almost in despair, 'But they will drag him from his secret hiding-place, for this last horror has not yet come to pass. The prophetic spirit, which came to me from my fathers, was upon me, and I was permitted to behold what is still in the future. They will clear away the charcoal and ashes which may hitherto have preserved his frame from corruption, and they will bury him in that newly-made grave, maybe with quicklime! Oh, God! direct me to the place of his

murder before his enemies have had time to do away with the traces of their crime!'

"At first I thought that he must have gone suddenly raving mad.

"'You are ill,' I said, feeling greatly alarmed. 'I shall send off for a doctor at once.'

"'Yes, I am ill,' he answered; 'but no doctor can heal with his drugs a wounded and sorrowing spirit! When the blood of my brother's murderer shall be as water at my feet, then, and then only, shall my body know health, and my mind repose!'".

CHAPTER XXIV.

As soon as he had recovered from the effects of his terrible dream, Mr. Marks seems to have become an altogether changed man. He was possessed of one fixed determination of purpose. He would discover the place where his brother's body was concealed, bury it with the sacred Jewish ceremonies, and then track out his supposed murderer, and bring him to justice. It was to this end that he devoted all the energies of his mind and all the resources of his purse.

Every time that he looked at his brother's talisman he felt confirmed and strengthened in his resolve. The small red specks upon the agate appeared, as he gazed at them, to turn into drops of blood, which cried out to him for vengeance.

In a shorter space of time than he could have expected his labours brought forth results. By a mere accident, the pawnbroker at whose shop he had purchased the

amulet discovered the name and address of the woman by whom it had been pledged. She was a Madame Zoubiroff, the man said, the wife of a Russian, who was accustomed to visit her from time to time, but who did not live in the same house with her. To Mr. Marks this name seemed to be painfully familiar, but he could not remember, at first, when or where he had heard it before. She was said to let furnished apartments in Paris, in a street which did not bear a very respectable reputation.

Undeterred by this, however, Mr. Marks lost no time in securing a bed-room at this place, representing himself as a commercial traveller, and carefully concealing his own name.

Madame Zoubiroff was a handsome woman, a Frenchwoman by birth, and her lodger soon succeeded in insinuating himself into her good graces. As far as he could judge, she seemed to be an easy-going, good-natured creature, of obscure origin and inferior education, but not at all wanting in sharpness and intelligence.

During the absence of her husband she did not pass her time in idle lamentations. She was surrounded by admirers, in whose company she was in the habit of dining at restaurants and visiting the theatres, so that, in the evening, she was nearly always absent from home. Mr. Marks discovered, before he had known this woman many days, that her husband was in the service of Prince Crecszoleski. At first, she did not say precisely what his vocations were, inferring that he was rather in the position of an agent, or secretary, than of an actual dependant. By-and-by, however, it transpired that he was the Prince's valet, or, as she preferred to describe him, his *maître d'hôtel*.

Mr. Marks knew, now, why the name of Zoubiroff had sounded familiar to him. It had occurred in the letters which his deceased brother had written to him from India, where Zoubiroff had attended to the requirements of the doctor as well as to those of his own master. En-

couraged by this discovery, Mr. Marks prayed that he might be still further enlightened.

One day, when Madame Zoubiroff had been setting her bed-room in order, her lodger met her in the passage, just outside his own door.

"*Tenez, monsieur*," she said, "*voici le portrait de Monsieur le Prince avec qui mon mari voyage en ce moment*," and she handed him a photograph from the pocket of her white apron.

The passage was dark, and Mr. Marks took it to a window to examine it. Upon beholding it he was, for the moment, completely overcome by his feelings. Madame Zoubiroff, however, on account of the darkness, did not observe his emotion.

The photograph, which was somewhat faded through age and exposure, represented a handsome man in the prime of youth. He was seated upon some roughly-hewn stone steps, leading to the entrance of what looked like a feudal castle. The steps were bordered by balustrades surmounted by sculptured eagles, holding shields wrought over with armorial bearings. Several men, looking like foresters, or gamekeepers, were standing upon each side of the central figure, dressed alike in some kind of distinctive livery; whilst, at the base of the steps, there crouched a group of savage-looking dogs, having the appearance of wolf- or boar-hounds.

"*Monsieur le Prince* is just going out hunting," Madame Zoubiroff explained. "He is very handsome, is he not? That is my husband standing a little on one side."

But Mr. Marks had his gaze riveted upon the central figure. He adjusted his *pince-nez* in order to examine the portrait more minutely. Yes; there was the short, handsome, Kalmuc face, the lynx eyes, marked brows, the fair hair and moustaches! The Prince was holding a rifle in his right hand, a *couteau-de-chasse* was hanging from his belt. He was wearing a close-fitting fur cap, and a loose

striped blouse, fastened with large buttons. Mr. Marks recognised him at once as the man he had beheld in his dream. He observed, however, that the countenance was different in one respect. It wore a much happier expression. He turned to the back of the photograph, and found a date under the Prince's signature. The photograph had been given to Zoubiroff a year before the doctor's mysterious disappearance.

"The Cain mark was not yet upon his brow," Mr. Marks thought, as he returned the portrait to his landlady.

After this discovery nothing fresh transpired for several days, during which Mr. Marks went through much mental perturbation. Sometimes Madame Zoubiroff herself became associated with his suspicions, and he found himself wondering whether she might not be the original of the female figure of his vision—the woman who had seemed to be urging on the murderer to the fatal deed, but whose features he had not been permitted to behold. Then, again, he dismissed the notion as preposterous. Madame Zoubiroff was, apparently, a very kind-hearted woman, and her ignorance and simplicity seemed to forbid the thought that she could even have been trusted as an accomplice. One day, seeing that he appeared to take so much interest in photographs, she came to him with one which represented a shrivelled old woman in a high white cap, sitting over a *chaufferette*. She explained that this was a portrait of her mother, reduced by age to a state of imbecility, and who was being cared for at her sole expense in a private *maison de santé*, not far from Arras.

"*Mon Dieu, monsieur!*" she said, "one must care about somebody! You men are all alike; it is impossible to find devotion that lasts! One would be wrong not to distract oneself, but the heart cannot be quite unoccupied! That poor old woman gave me birth,—she looked after me when I was a little child, and now that she is *en plein radotage*, it is for her that I make my economies, so

that she shall want for nothing at the house of the doctor with whom I have placed her *en pension*, close to *Arras* in the *Pas de Calais*."

These filial sentiments confirmed Mr. Marks in the good opinion he had formed of her. Nevertheless, as time pressed, he decided one day, merely as an experiment, to show her his brother's amulet. He took occasion, therefore, when she was passing the afternoon at home to join her, upon some pretence, in her little *salon*, where he found her engaged in needlework. He had placed the amulet in a hand-bag into which he had also slipped some photographs of his children, and these he took out and showed to her. She admired them, regretted she had no children herself, and then began to talk again of her devotion to her mother. In returning the photographs to the bag, Mr. Marks purposely arranged that one of them should become entangled in the chains of the amulet, and that the two should fall together on the floor. Without having seen what it was that had dropped, Madame Zoubiroff reached down her hand to pick it up. Her whole countenance changed when she beheld the amulet.

"*Mon Dieu, monsieur!*" she exclaimed, looking as pale and scared as if she had seen a serpent. "Where can you have been searching to find that?"

Her emotion did not escape Mr. Marks, who was observing her narrowly.

"You have seen it before?" he inquired, carelessly. "It has belonged to some one you knew?"

She soon recovered from her embarrassment, and again Mr. Marks became impressed with her candour and sincerity.

"*Monsieur* must have bought this in London," she said, after she had carefully examined the talisman. "When first I saw it I was astonished, because I never expected to behold it again, because, too, it is connected with those very persons about whom I have often talked with you.

Here is its history: *Monsieur le Prince* Creeszoleski gave Zoubiroff, years and years ago, an old hunting-coat, the coat in which you saw the Prince in the photograph. Zoubiroff sent it to me with some other things, when, slipped in beneath the lining of one of the pockets, I found this. I wrote to Zoubiroff and begged him to inform His Highness of my discovery, when the Prince sent back word that I had better keep it as it was a "*porte-bonheur*," which he hoped might bring me good fortune. I retained it, therefore, until, wishing that my old mother might have a cup of good *bouillon* the last thing at night, which was counted as an extra, I raised money upon that and some other 'objects' in London when last I was there, fully meaning afterwards to redeem them. The time went by, however, before I was aware of it, and so the *porte-bonheur* has passed into the possession of *monsieur!*"

After a few cleverly-directed questions, Mr. Marks discovered that Madame Zoubiroff had not pawned the hunting-coat with the talisman. It was old and torn, she said; she had intended to repair it first, but she had never had time. It was in the house at that very moment, hanging up in one of her cupboards.

Mr. Marks was greatly excited at hearing this. To make a long story short, one evening when Madame Zoubiroff was from home, and the *bonne* gone out on an errand, he made an examination of the cupboards in his landlady's bedroom. In one of these he discovered the coat. It corresponded in every respect to the coat of his dream. As he examined it by the light of his candle, a cold shudder ran through his frame. The lining was stained with dark marks in one or two places. Was this blood? he asked himself; and, if so, was it human blood, or only that of animals slain in the chase? After all these years, who would be able to distinguish between the two? He next turned to the breast of the coat, to the place at which he had seen the doctor clutching in his

vision. One of the large metal buttons was missing just at this spot, having been apparently torn away by main force, with a portion of the material of the coat. A terrible impression was produced upon Mr. Marks by what he regarded as a fresh proof of his brother's murder. He cut off another of the buttons with his penknife, and put it in his pocket before he replaced the coat in the cupboard. It was a flat metal button with some kind of monogram upon it surmounted by a coronet.

Next day, Mr. Marks had a long interview with one of the chiefs of police, with whom he had recently been in constant communication, and soon afterwards he paid a visit to Prince Crecszolcski's *château* in Poland, having discovered, through his landlady, that the Prince was absent in England. Here he made important discoveries. A peasant, who was a mere lad at the time of the doctor's disappearance, remembered him perfectly. He had been employed to help him and the Prince with their experiments in a laboratory which had been fitted up in one of the vaults of the old castle. He recollected the day of the wolf-hunt, having been told off with other lads to assist as a "beater." He had never believed that the doctor had been devoured by wolves. Nobody believed it; only this was a subject upon which they seldom spoke, fearing lest their words might reach the ears of His Highness, who was the doctor's friend.

"What *did* they believe, then?" Mr. Marks asked, vainly striving to suppress his impatience. He had not neglected to provide himself with both money and drink, under the influence of which his informant became more and more communicative. He explained to the man that he himself had been acquainted with Dr. Bernard, and that he was anxious to learn every particular connected with his death, having never felt that the theory of the devouring wolves was altogether a satisfactory one. For some time the man seemed to be afraid to say what he

really thought. (Could he suspect the truth? Mr. Marks asked himself.) Then, after a while, he imparted his views, which were shared, he said, at the time by nearly all the peasants upon the Crecszoleski estates; Dr. Bernard, as was well known long before his disappearance, was a necromancer or wizard. He studied the black arts, wrought spells of enchantment, and held communication with evil spirits. In the lonely vaults under the old castle he practised all kinds of strange, unholy rites, and he had persuaded the Prince to do likewise and to think of nothing but the study of magic and the raising of demons. Some even said that he was "an accurséd Jew," who sacrificed human flesh at Christmas and the Pentecost, and that he was endeavouring to pervert the Prince to his false doctrines. . . .

Things could not be permitted to go on long like this. Upon the evening after the wolf-hunt, he could answer for it, the Prince and the doctor returned to the castle together. They left their horses at the outskirts of the forest, and came back on foot. It was then dusk, but he knew the Prince by his height, and Doctor Bernard, who was quite a short man, by his beard. Screened by one of the yew-hedges, he had seen them go together into the vaults by a little private door which communicated with the garden, and of which they alone possessed the key. When he had spoken of this afterwards, Zoubiroff, the Prince's valet, had insisted that he was mistaken as to the day; but then Zoubiroff was always fancying that nobody could ever know the rights of anything except himself! It was only natural, too, that for his master's sake, seeing that Dr. Bernard was his friend, and that they were both engaged in the same unhallowed machinations, Zoubiroff should wish to conceal the magician's terrible fate; for there could be no doubt as to what had been his end. Things of the same kind had happened, over and over again, to both wizards and witches alike!

In a word, the ignorant peasant believed that Dr. Bernard, in the midst of what he called his "impious incantations," had been carried off bodily by the spirit of evil! . . .

The Prince, who must have witnessed the awful scene, was naturally anxious to hush matters up and account for his friend's disappearance in some other way. It had acted as a salutary warning to His Highness, so the catastrophe had had its uses. Everybody noticed that since the doctor's disappearance the Prince had been an utterly changed man. He seemed to have totally abandoned the study of magic, and the vaults, where he and the doctor used to carry on their unhallowed researches, had been permanently closed for many years. One would have said, indeed, that the home of his fathers had become hateful to him. He seldom visited it now, save for two or three days at a time, and then he had never been known to go down once into the laboratory, although he had left there all the instruments and phials which he had made use of for his magical and chemical experiments. These were on no account to be disturbed, he said, lest, in the hands of the inexperienced, they might produce deadly exhalations, or dangerous explosions. And so His Highness had locked up the door which led into the vaults from the garden, and had caused it to be further secured by an iron bar. There was another door leading to a secret staircase, which communicated with the Prince's apartments, but this too, had been protected by bolt and bar. There was little need, however, for all these precautions! It was not likely, after what had been whispered abroad, that anybody would wish to venture down into such an accursed den! Lonely and deserted though it was, strange and awful sounds were said to proceed from it sometimes, and one of the old gardeners, who had been at work not far from a grating that served as a ventilator, swore that he had heard some one poking the

fire in the laboratory, and that upon peeping through the bars he could see plainly the red glare of the furnace.

There was no doubt but that the place was haunted, either by the ghost of the doctor or by the evil spirits who had carried him off. His Highness, aware of this, looked upon the place now as unhallowed ground. He was thinking of letting it, or of selling it even (so it was said), and his servants would scarcely miss one of whom they now saw so little. Better, far better, for them that it should pass into the possession of strangers! Perhaps, then, the curse which hung over it might depart for ever!

Mrs. Marks told me that her husband, after listening to these ignorant surmises, arrived at three definite conclusions, namely: that his brother had certainly come to his death by foul means upon the evening following upon the wolf-hunt; that his corpse was still lying concealed in the vaults underneath the castle; and that Zoubiroff, the Prince's valet, was either an accomplice in the crime, or that he had, at any rate, been aware of it, and had done everything in his power to screen his master from suspicion.

Before leaving the neighbourhood, Mr. Marks made every effort to obtain an entrance to the vaults, giving as a reason the interest he had always taken in matters connected with psychical research, which made him desire above all things, he declared, to behold the ghost of the doctor poking the laboratory fire. His endeavours, however, were fruitless. Prince Cresczoleski's retainers were too conscientious to disobey their master's orders, and their scruples seemed to be mingled with a superstitious dread of approaching even as near as the entrance to the vaults. But a firm determination of purpose will work wonders. Within a few weeks from this time, Mr. Marks had almost concluded his negotiations for the lease of the *château* preparatory, as he

pretended, to purchasing it outright. On his way to confer with Hugo, who was then in England, he stayed at his former lodgings in Paris, and there learnt from his unsuspecting landlady that the Prince's sister, "*Comtesse* Dobrowolska," as she styled her, avoiding all allusion to her second marriage, was likewise passing through Paris, on her way to England, and staying for a few days at the Hôtel Mirabeau. Here it was that Mr. Marks succeeded in scraping acquaintance with her. Besides being to all intents and purposes an Englishman, he bore little or no resemblance to his Polish brother, and, under the recently assumed name of "Marks," his relationship to Dr. Bernard was not suspected. Madame Dobrowolska merely saw in him an English gentleman, with whom she had providentially become acquainted at the very moment when he was anxious to purchase just such an estate as her brother was anxious to sell. She talked over all the preliminaries with Mr. Marks before she had even communicated with the Prince, and then started off for England, where, disappointed in her plan of joining her brother at Lord Silchester's, she had despatched the telegram which had peremptorily summoned him to London, and prevented him from keeping his tryst with me in the old summer-house at Northover Park.

What took place at this interview between the brother and sister it is impossible to say. One of its results, however, had been, that Mr. Marks was to occupy the castle for the period of one year, with the view of ultimately purchasing it. Then, not many weeks afterwards, Delphine had sent her brother that other imperative message, which had separated me from my husband upon the very day that followed upon our marriage.

What had been the real object of that flying visit to the Polish castle, whence Hugo had returned seeming a humbler, a sadder, and yet a happier man, accessible to those tender emotions which had hitherto found no place

in his heart, craving eagerly for sympathy and love, and with a look upon his face as though he had for ever buried and hidden away some haunting presence which had come between him and his rest, and prevented him from experiencing the brighter and purer pleasures of existence?

CHAPTER XXV.

BUT meanwhile the French police authorities, obedient to the instructions of Mr. Marks, had kept an eye upon Zoubiroff. To watch him was almost equivalent to watching his master, since the two invariably travelled together; and perhaps Mr. Marks, with his golden key, may have opened the minds of the detectives so as to enable them to understand his real wishes upon the subject. Zoubiroff had furnished the police with an excellent pretext for their vigilance by associating with, and receiving, at his house in Paris, revolutionary characters, who were known to be engaged in plotting against the Government, with which fact Mr. Marks had become acquainted by reason of his friendly relations with the valet's wife.

When, therefore, my unhappy husband and his sister paid their mysterious visit to Poland just after our marriage, they did not travel alone. Two simple and inoffensive strangers, to judge by their manners and appearance, entered the railway carriage which Zoubiroff was trying to reserve for the Prince and his sister, just before the train started. They professed to understand no word of any language except German, and apparently passed most of the journey in sleep; nevertheless they managed to acquire a good deal of information in the course of it. These two strangers, arrayed in various different disguises,

dogged Hugo's footsteps even after he had reached the seclusion of his own park. They succeeded, by some means unattainable to Mr. Marks, in entering the vaults of the castle, and there, from a place of concealment, were witnesses of a ghastly scene, the same as that which Mr. Marks, with his inherited "pre-vision," had beheld, some months before, in a dream.

Two men, working together in silence at midnight, dug a grave in the hard earthen flooring of the cellar. It was deep and wide, but they worked on without ever pausing in their dreadful task. When it was finished, the taller man leant back as though exhausted against an advancing buttress, and wiped the drops from his brow. Then a woman, muffled in a long cloak, came forward. She wore a black lace veil over her head, fastened at the throat by an emerald pendant, and emerald earrings to match it in her ears. She said a few words of encouragement to the man, who needed them, and then, flinging aside her cloak and veil, proceeded with her bare white hands to help him at his task. Not far from where they stood was a heap of rubbish, — mouldering beams and barrels, crumbled masonry, breakages of glass and crockery, — smothered with cinders. Slowly and cautiously, by the dim light of a lantern which had been set down hard by, the two began clearing away these *débris*.

But why should I repeat the sickening details which are already known to the reader through the strange revelation which was made manifest to the dead man's brother?

As in that terrible vision, the pale, eyeless face was ere long disclosed, and seemed to look up to heaven in mute appeal from the dust and ashes that surrounded it. Hugo, my husband, reeled back, overcome by the horrible sight. His sister again whispered words of encouragement in his ear; Zoubiroff came forward to assist him. Finally the mouldering remains of Dr. Maurice Bernard, marred by

"Decay's effacing fingers,"

and yet not so marred as to be past all recognition, were lowered hurriedly into the newly-made grave.

Zoubiroff collected the mould which was displaced by the interment in two empty wine-barrels. These he concealed until the following evening, when, favoured by the darkness, he rolled them down to the river which flowed through the Prince's domain, and emptied their contents therein. Before doing this, however, he assisted his master in strewing the rubbish beneath which the body had lain so long concealed, over the spot where it had just been newly buried.

Oh, God! the horror of knowing that Hugo should have come to me straight from this ghastly work as a lover—as a husband! That he—a murderer—should have clasped my hands, kissed my lips, and held me to the heart that was so black with crime!

Zoubiroff was arrested soon after this in Paris, having had time to travel thus far with his master before the particulars of the suspected crime had been laid before the authorities at St. Petersburg. His papers were seized, together with the old hunting-coat. Mr. Marks began by accusing him of the murder; one of the buttons of this coat having been found tightly clenched in the right hand of the dead man, when, for the second time, his mouldering remains were brought to light.

"Thereby," said Mrs. Marks, "proving either that a miracle must have been performed, or else that our rabbis did not know the laws of Nature when they taught that, though man is born with his hands clenched, he dies with them wide open, since entering life he desires to grasp everything, and leaving it, all he possesses passes away."

Then the fact came out that the coat had belonged to the Prince, who had worn it upon the day of the wolf-hunt, after which he had given it to his servant, as it was old and shabby. Zoubiroff had sent it, with some other things, to the woman who passed for his wife, but to

whom, it turned out, he had never been legally married. She had been, for many years, Madame Dobrowolska's confidential attendant; and, upon leaving her service, had been established by Zoubiroff in the lodging-house in Paris at which Mr. Marks had taken up his temporary abode.

Although the valet possessed a cautious and astute disposition, he was completely thrown off his guard in the course of the preliminary examination to which he was subjected upon his arrival at St. Petersburg, for he had been under the impression that his arrest was due to his intimacy with the Nihilists and Polish patriots who frequented the Paris lodging-house, and so was totally unprepared when he was questioned as to the mysterious disappearance of Dr. Bernard.

With every desire, as I verily believe, to serve and screen his master, the tissue of falsehood and prevarication in which he involved himself proved fatal to the Prince's interests. Finally, cross-questioned and browbeaten, the valet lost patience, and made a full confession. The Prince, he said, had certainly taken the life of Dr. Bernard; but from what motive it was impossible to divine, as the two had always seemed to be upon the most friendly terms. The doctor must have seriously provoked His Highness to turn all his friendship to aversion. Perhaps they had disputed about something. The doctor and the Countess had frequent disagreements. It was possible that, upon this occasion, the Prince may have taken his sister's part, and been moved to anger against her husband. Of all this, Zoubiroff knew nothing. The Countess's maid witnessed the tragedy by accident, and, through her, he had become aware of it. It was quite true that, years afterwards, he had assisted his master and the Countess to conceal the body more effectually, believing that the catastrophe occurred in hot blood, and without premeditation. It would have been far better to have destroyed

it in the furnace of the laboratory, as he (Zoubiroff) had at first suggested. All had been prepared for this, and the furnace heated to a great heat; when, at the last moment, the Prince's nerves had failed him; he having beheld, he declared, the face of a man looking down at them through the grating which communicated with the garden. The doctor's body was allowed to remain, therefore, in its temporary place of concealment, until quite recently, when it had been properly buried. The whole affair had always been a complete mystery to Zoubiroff, His Highness having been till that time of a most gentle and humane disposition. He thought it his duty to mention, however, that the Princess, his mother, had been confined for several years in a private lunatic asylum, and that the Prince himself had had a somewhat severe attack of sunstroke whilst he was travelling in India. The fatal act may, therefore, have been committed during a fit of temporary frenzy for which he was not responsible.

Almost immediately after Zoubiroff's confession my husband was arrested at Monte Carlo and charged with the murder. There was one other circumstance connected with that ghastly midnight undertaking which it will be necessary for me to mention. When the woman who had assisted Hugo and his servant in their secret labours turned to the place where she had deposited her cloak and veil, the ornament with which the latter had been secured was nowhere to be found. She searched for it as well as she could in the dim light, for, besides being of great value, it seems that it was a family jewel. Hugo, however, who was in a state of extreme agitation, was, naturally, impatient to depart from the dreadful spot. He told her that it had probably become entangled in the trimming of her dress, that she would assuredly find it when they emerged into a clearer light, and that now they must be gone. They departed, therefore, by the

little staircase which communicated with the Prince's private apartments.

As soon as they were gone the two detectives, who, from their place of concealment, had seen and heard everything, sought for, and discovered, the ornament. Madame Zoubiroff, as I will continue to call her, who was arrested soon after her lover and associate, was suddenly confronted with it at the preliminary examination of the accused. She recognised it at once, not knowing then what might be the effect of her words, as the property of the Countess Dobrowolska. It had belonged once to her mother, and she nearly always wore it. Hugo's sister became, through this circumstance, involved in the proceedings, but, when sought for, she was not to be found. She had quitted Paris immediately after the arrest of Zoubiroff, of which she had probably been informed through her former maid. It was her custom, it seems, to disappear from time to time without leaving any address, and she had either done this now, unconscious altogether of her brother's terrible position, or else, deeming discretion the better part of valour, she had taken refuge in flight.

Madame Zoubiroff, when confronted with the Prince's accuser, stoutly denied that she had been a witness of the crime, or that she had ever spoken upon the subject to Zoubiroff. It was utterly impossible to reconcile the evidence of these two individuals, which disagreed upon every important point. The woman was placed under police supervision, whilst awaiting the decisive trial. She managed, however—some said with the connivance of the authorities—to escape from St. Petersburg, since which time, like her former mistress, she had never been heard of.

CHAPTER XXVI.

I INQUIRED of Mrs. Marks, as soon as I could find the voice wherewith to question her, how the Prince had conducted himself since his arrest? She replied, that her husband, who had gone to see him with his heart full of anger and abhorrence, had been altogether disarmed and softened by his demeanour. He had, as yet, neither avowed nor denied the crime with which he was charged; but having placed his case in the hands of an eminent lawyer he preserved the calm indifference of a fatalist. Mr. Marks said that he had no doubt whatever of his guilt, but he had begun to wonder, after all he had heard respecting his occult studies, experiments in mesmerism, and the like, whether the crime—for which there seemed to be no motive whatsoever—might not have been committed when he was in some abnormal condition of mind or body.

Upon hearing this I was at once reminded of what my husband had told me of his sensitiveness to all spiritual impressions; his enforced and reluctant obedience to a will which was stronger than his own; and of the mysterious person who had so paralysed what he used to term his "volitional power" that he had come to consider him (or her) as his "absolute controller," and whose influence it was to have been my mission to combat and counteract. I had always suspected that this person was his sister Delphine. I felt convinced of it now. The face of Hugo, as I had seen it in my dream at Northover, pale, beseeching, appealing to me as though for mercy, recurred to me now with painful vividness. Tears rushed to my eyes before I could check them, and I pleaded earnestly with Mrs. Marks that she would use her influence to soften her husband's heart towards the man who was now so completely in his power.

"There is some terrible mystery about all this," I said; "something we cannot understand! I implore you to beg of your husband to be merciful!"

She replied that a great change seemed to have come over Mr. Marks, to judge by his letters, from the last of which she read me an extract, which ran somewhat as follows:—

"My brother Maurice is lying at rest now in the Jewish cemetery upon the outskirts of our native town, by the side of the grave which contains the mortal remains of our beloved parents. His body, by what appears almost a miracle, brought about, possibly, by the action of the chemicals which mingled with the refuse beneath which it had been concealed, was mercifully preserved for my recognition. It has been enshrouded in the Robe of Atonement, and with my own hands did I bind the leather phylacteries round both brow and wrists. Was it not in order that I might perform these sacred rites that God sent me the visions, and is not my work accomplished? Or, was it intended that I should pursue the slayer with my vengeance? I am asking myself these questions now, and awaiting, prayerfully, the answer that may come to me. When I look into the face of my brother's murderer my heart grows tender towards him. There is no remorse, no indignation, as at a false accusation—no shame or malice in his countenance. He is calm and self-possessed, like one who is prepared for the worst, but who is supported by a consciousness of innocence. How reconcile this attitude with the certainty I have of his guilt? I can explain it only by coming to the conclusion that he is mad, or by the sunstroke that he suffered from in India. I turn for counsel to the amulet which I now believe to be possessed of the most potent virtues. The red drops upon the agate, which seemed once to incite me to feelings of revenge, appear now to have shrunk into insignificance. 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith

the Lord!' this is the message that comes to me from its contemplation. Still, madmen like Crecszoleski must be restrained." . . .

I remember well what my godfather had said when warning me in the old summer-house at home. "Hugo Crecszoleski" (he had said) "is a strange incomprehensible being. He is not governed by any of the ordinary laws which control civilised man. He is a mystic, an impressionist. He listens to, and obeys, voices that nobody else can hear." Might not one of these "voices" have spoken when he had so unaccountably taken the life of the Jewish professor, seemingly one of his closest friends? and might not the voice, as well as the will to insist upon this evil deed, have proceeded from his sister Delphine? But here again I was at a loss to conceive what could have been the motive which had inspired her.

It was as though Mrs. Marks had guessed my thoughts. "The sister is somehow mixed up in the matter," she said; "of this we are quite sure. Why, otherwise, should she have taken herself off? In *her* case, too, my husband says he perceives a motive for the crime. When he was in Paris he tried to learn all he could about her antecedents. Several facts came out through his landlady, and he fell in, also, with a French diplomat, with whom he was already acquainted, and who had once been an admirer of the Countess's, during the lifetime of her first husband, the old General. From this person, having introduced her name into the conversation by mentioning that he was lodging with her former maid, he learnt that, although she had been surrounded by adorers, she was supposed to have cared for only one of them, an Englishman, occupying a very good position. She seems to have expected that this gentleman would marry her as soon as she became a widow, but when she was free he showed no intention of doing so, knowing, perhaps, a little too

much about her already. She continued to importune him with her attentions for some time, but at last heard that he was deeply attached to a lady in England, and that, whilst this lady lived, he had made up his mind never to marry anybody else. As soon as she had assured herself that all her fascinations were thrown away upon him, she seems to have retired in disgust and disappointment to her brother's country house. Here she became acquainted with Dr. Bernard, who fell in love with her at once. My husband discovered that at about this time she had contracted heavy gambling debts. Her brother was said to have behaved with great generosity towards her, but perhaps, for this very reason, she may not have liked to apply to him too often. Disappointed in love, disreputable in character, and deeply in debt, you can understand now why she consented to marry the wealthy Hebrew professor, although she may not have cared about him in the least."

I told Mrs. Marks that I could quite believe this of a woman such as she described, but that I could not understand why she should afterwards desire to do away with her benefactor. "Listen," rejoined Mrs. Marks, "and I will endeavour to explain, although you will say, perhaps, that all this is mere conjecture. My husband, however, who has thought of nothing else for months, fully believes in this theory. You understood that when the Countess consented to marry the doctor she thought that the man she really cared for was quite out of her reach?"

"The man that was in love with the lady in England?" I asked.

"Yes; and who had told the Countess that, whilst this lady lived, he would never marry any other woman. Well, Mr. Marks learnt, through this same French gentleman, that very soon after her union with Dr. Bernard, this lady in England died quite unexpectedly. 'If I had only

waited a miserable six months!' the Countess wrote, regretfully, to this French gentleman in Paris. So we know that in six months she had already repented of her marriage. To this second marriage, as I have before told you, Madame Zoubiroff never made any allusion, referring to the Prince's sister always as the 'Comtesse Dobrowolska.' Amongst the papers, however, that were seized at her lodging-house, was a letter from the Countess to her former maid, which proved not only that the woman was entirely in her mistress's confidence, but also that she must have been employed by her to act the part of a spy in the house of her English rival. This letter proved, too, that Dr. Bernard and his wife lived upon anything but happy terms. I have brought a copy of this letter with me to show you."

Mrs. Marks hereupon unclasped her bag, and handed me the copy in question. It was written in French, of which the following is a literal translation:—"You have then really seen her dead—this woman whose existence prevented the realisation of my dearest hopes? You are quite sure that the earth covers her—that her face is hidden for ever from his eyes? Your mission is now finished, and your recompense awaits you here, where I expect you as soon as you quit your present 'situation.' Visit the good old mother at Arras on your way—I can assure you she need want for nothing; but do not remain there too long, as I am expecting you with impatience. You will find me much changed and aged since last you saw me, for instead of the repose which I hoped to obtain through this marriage, and the devoted slave that I was assured I should find in my husband, I am saddled with the most exacting of tyrants, who accuses me of being always in the wrong, who asks me all sorts of indiscreet questions upon the subject of my past, and who, in all matters connected with money, proves himself to be, ten thousand times over, a Jew!" Then, in conclusion came

the following significant sentence: "The idea you had was a good one, and I shall always count it as a service rendered; but if only the inspiration had come to you a little sooner! All the same, the news cannot fail to rejoice me. One was very foolish to re-marry so quickly, but after the three letters you sent me, what was there to hope?"

"My husband considers," said Mrs. Marks, "that this letter throws a good deal of light upon the relations of Dr. Bernard and his wife, and also upon those of the Countess and her maid. He fancies that after the death of the English lady—in which he does not feel at all sure that these two wicked women may not have had a hand—Dr. Bernard must have become hateful to his wife, who, hoping to regain her influence over the man she had really cared for, prevailed by some means upon her unfortunate brother (a mere puppet in her hands, from all we hear) to do away with the one whom she regarded now merely in the light of an obstacle. The servants about the place in Poland admitted that the doctor got on very badly with his wife, and a man who had been one of the Countess's footmen remembered to have heard her exclaim in a fit of passion, 'Alas! that I, a Crecszoleski, should have allowed myself to be contaminated by marriage with an accurséd Jew!'"

"And this woman is still at liberty!" I cried, "whilst her brother is bearing all the burden of her crimes!"

"I don't think she can remain in hiding for long," Mrs. Marks returned. "She is too conspicuous a person, and too fond of adventure to keep very quiet. Somewhere she is sure to be heard of. My husband has placed an advertisement in several of the principal English and French newspapers, to the effect that a very valuable emerald and diamond ornament has been found, and will be delivered up to the owner, if it is correctly described, upon application. Possibly this may produce some response. Then she is, as I have no doubt you are aware,

her brother's heir. Should he be imprisoned for life, or sent to Siberia, I think you will see that she will come forward and advance her claims, for, failing heirs, Mr. Marks says that the estates will probably be confiscated to the Crown. How thankful you ought to be, my dear young lady, to think that you have no children! If you had, you might lose some of them, as I did my eldest little boy, or they might grow up to be madmen and murderers, like their father before them!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

I THINK I may say with truth that I come, now, to the most miserable period of my life. Only those who may have been placed in some sort of analogous position will be able to realise my sufferings.

I have taken so long in relating the particulars of my interview with Mrs. Marks that my readers will imagine, perhaps, that it was an unusually long one. She remained with me, indeed, for very nearly the whole afternoon; but what has taken so much time to write took far less in the telling. Several of the facts I have mentioned, too, only came to my knowledge some years afterwards. I have set them down here, however, in order that my story may be as clear and comprehensible as possible. It was close upon our dinner-hour when Mrs. Marks took her departure, but I felt too prostrate in mind and body to attempt to eat. I retired to my bedroom, where I gave way to tears which I was wholly unable to control, but which did not afford me the slightest relief.

My mind was in such a state of confusion that it was

with the greatest difficulty that I was able to tell Miss Warden of all that I had just heard. Both she and Mason appeared to be seriously alarmed at my condition. An English resident doctor used to look in nearly every morning to see my father, and they arranged—without telling me of it—that he should pay me a visit on the following day.

I was looking particularly ill, as it happened, and feeling faint and miserable. As I contemplated my pale face in the glass, I could not help wondering—in spite of my pre-occupation—that mere moral suffering, uncombined with bodily disease, should have left such traces upon my appearance. Whenever I had felt at all unhappy before, I had always looked too well for anybody to suspect it. But then, this was not a case of ordinary unhappiness!

The doctor—a benevolent-looking old man—came to see me next day. He appeared rather puzzled at my symptoms, not being aware of all the disturbing influences which had of late encompassed me. He enjoined quiet, cheerful society, and fresh air, with exercise short of fatigue—the usual prescriptions. To Miss Warden he said that my illness was chiefly nervous, that I was a little hysterical; and he inquired whether I had lately gone through any sort of mental trouble? To this Miss Warden could only make answer—seeing that he was not yet in our confidence—that I had been rendered anxious by the state of my father's health. The doctor left me, saying that he would see me again in the course of a few days. Since hearing Mrs. Marks's story, I had become possessed of an intense desire to conceal all traces of my marriage. Of course, if Hugo could have returned to me, having satisfactorily refuted all these terrible charges, I might at once have felt differently. I feared, however, that now there could be but little hope of this. His flying visit to Poland—immediately after our union—had obviously been made, at the instigation of his sister, for the sole purpose of more effectually concealing

his victim's body before the new tenant came into occupation. The proof that the vaults were secretly visited, at the dead of night, by Hugo, Madame Dobrowolska, and Zoubiroff, did not, unfortunately, rest solely upon the shadowy evidence of a dream! I seemed to know now, as if by instinct, what motives had actuated the two guilty persons. They had desired so eagerly to rid themselves of the place which was associated with their crime, that they had closed with the proposals of Mr. Marks before they had fully realised the risks which might attend the occupation of the castle by strangers. When they had achieved their object, however—as is often the case—the drawbacks connected with it had presented themselves; to Delphine, as was evident, in the first instance. She had telegraphed to her brother upon the morning following on our marriage. He had obeyed her, as he invariably did obey her—in everything, and the two had started off together to Poland, in order, as they fondly believed, to make all things secure.

In spite of the pity I could not help feeling for Hugo, and a rooted conviction that he had been made—through some strange combination of occult forces—the tool of one who was more guilty than himself; the dreadful circumstances of the case had shocked and revolted me beyond description. How could I possibly become free, I asked myself, from all connection with this terrible family? It seemed to me, at this time, that this was the consummation most devoutly to be wished.

The fact that Prince Crecszoleski was privately married was known, as yet, to only a few persons. His accuser had become aware of it through my own letters to him, and through other letters and papers which had been seized at Zoubiroff's lodging-house, Zoubiroff had been thrown off his guard by the questions put to him by those who were already in the possession of many important facts, and had thus been the means of furnishing

Mr. Marks with fuller particulars. But Mr. Marks, in spite of the hardening influence which I had heard was frequently the accompaniment of great wealth, did not seem to be either unfeeling or vindictive. Might he not be induced, perhaps, by his wife—if she would consent thus far to act as my friend—to employ some of this very wealth for the future preservation of our secret? He had promised her that the Prince's marriage—having nothing whatever to do with the murder—should not be dwelt upon at the trial; but this was scarcely enough. I said to myself, too, that though he might have spent large sums with the view of furthering his own projects, he might not be so willing to fling away his money upon mine. In this case, how gladly would I repay him afterwards for any expenses he might incur! I could put aside the income I was allowed for my dress; go about, if need be, in rags, and so pay off my debt to Mr. Marks by instalments. I could sell my jewelry; first and foremost of all, the cat's-eye ring, which had become now positively hateful in my sight; or I could borrow the necessary sum from my godfather, who had made me promise that I would apply to him if ever I stood in need of a friend. Why, indeed, should my marriage now be ever made public at all? Who would benefit by the disgrace and misery which such an exposure would entail? Not Hugo, certainly; nor Madame Dobrowolska, who was her brother's heir. Mrs. Marks had told me that the Prince would probably be banished to Siberia, or shut up in a lunatic asylum. There was no fear, she assured me, of his suffering what we term in England "the extreme penalty of the law;" since—in the then-existing state of public feeling throughout the whole length and breadth of the dominions of the Czar—it would be deemed unwise by the authorities to publish abroad anything calculated to cast discredit upon a member of the aristocracy. The Jews, too, she said, had

already suffered enough. If the circumstances of Dr. Bernard's murder could possibly be suppressed there was not the least doubt but that every effort would be made in this direction. Supposing the guilt of the Prince was established at the forthcoming trial, he would simply disappear, as it were, from the face of the earth, but there would be no public scandal. The worst that could happen would be, perhaps, that a paragraph might appear in some "officially-inspired" newspaper, to the effect that Prince Crecszoleski had, unhappily, gone out of his mind, and had had to be placed under restraint, and then nobody would ever hear anything of him again.

I asked if it was likely that I should ever be allowed to go to him in his exile, or visit him in his prison? Mrs. Marks replied that it was impossible, until after the trial, to express an opinion upon this point. She thought, however, that my husband would be as entirely separated from me as from the rest of the world. "How could we be certain, otherwise," she asked, "after what had already happened, that his wife might not become his second victim?"

Why, therefore, need anybody desire to declare our marriage? Why should it not be kept a secret to the end of time? I had no marriage settlements—no children. I could never marry any one else, of course, whilst poor Hugo lived; but it was not very likely, after this first experience, that I should ever wish to risk happiness and peace of mind for the second time.

I called upon Mrs. Marks a few days after her visit, at the Hôtel des Anglais, and implored her to impress upon her husband how earnestly I desired that, if possible, no mention should be made of my marriage at the Prince's trial. She received me very kindly, and promised to do all in her power to further my wishes.

"But I can't think that you are acting very wisely,"

she said, "in wanting to hush up your marriage. I should think it must be always pleasant to hear one's self called 'Princess,' whatever one's husband had done; and Mr. Marks says, too, that if the Emperor knew that the Prince had an innocent young wife, who had had nothing whatever to do with his crimes, he would very likely grant her a handsome pension. I hear that the Emperor of Austria has just made a very generous allowance to a poor lady whose husband turned out, quite unexpectedly, to be a brigand."

"I want no pension," I answered. "I am quite contented with the little money I have. If I had a pension, people would want to know the reason, and then all this dreadful story would be sure to come out."

"It is a pity," Mrs. Marks rejoined, "that you Christians have made divorce so difficult and expensive, particularly amongst the Roman Catholics. Now, in our Mishna we read that the Pharisees allowed bills of divorce to be drawn up against women who had only allowed their husband's soup to boil over into the fire! I wish you could get rid of your husband as easily, but I'm afraid you would have to obtain a special dispensation from the Pope."

I explained to her that, although my husband belonged to a Roman Catholic family, and had been brought up in that faith, we had been married according to the rites of the Protestant Church. She told me that, this being the case, she thought there would not be much difficulty, supposing I wished to get the marriage annulled, only I must then make up my mind not to shrink from the publicity which such a course would entail. I replied that I did not, indeed, feel as if I had the courage, now, to face the shame of such an exposure.

"Then you must try and think of some other plan," she said, kindly. "I suppose that he never ill-treated you in any way, or made love to any other woman?"

"Never, never!" I answered. "I should feel much happier now, for several reasons, if he had not been so kind!"

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Marks, "he thought it rather too soon to begin ill-treating you, for I can't believe that such a man could have made a good husband, even if all this had never come out. How long ago is it since you married him?"

"We were married in October," I answered, "very nearly six months ago, but my husband left me the day after our wedding, and I never saw him again until he came here, at the end of January."

"Indeed!" returned Mrs. Marks, reflectively, "I thought it was much longer ago. Poor young lady! It does indeed seem hard that you should have your existence spoilt for ever for the sake of a man who can be, in reality, little more than a stranger to you."

I rejoined Miss Warden in the town after paying this visit, and we drove back together to our hotel, conversing as we went upon the painful subject which was for ever present to my mind.

We had the place, now, entirely to ourselves, having delayed our departure for England from day to day, first, on account of the anxiety I felt to learn all I could through the letters of Mr. Marks to his wife; and, secondly, in order that my father, who had been somewhat more than usually indisposed of late, might recover sufficiently to be enabled to bear the fatigues of the journey.

We were now in the middle of April, when Italy (for though the spot at which we were staying is now politically "France," it must remain "Italy," geographically and sentimentally, to the end of time) becomes lovelier and lovelier every day. The sun, however, was extremely hot at times, and though we felt but little inconvenience from this in our shady suburban retreat, we foresaw that railway travelling would become more unpleasant as the

warmth increased. We were anxious, therefore, to depart for the north as soon as possible.

We met the doctor coming out of the hotel as we drove up to the door, and he returned with us to our apartment in order to give us his opinion respecting Sir Harry, about whom, he said, he could not help feeling a little uneasy.

Miss Warden asked him whether he observed any improvement in my appearance, she having taken care that I should adhere to his instructions? He left the room with her, as I thought, to consult about my father. In reality, however, it was in order to confide to her his impressions with regard to myself. When she rejoined me the doctor had taken his departure. I saw that she looked as if she had been crying. She kissed me, still seeming to be greatly distressed and unnerved. I imagined that she must have been told that Sir Harry could not recover; and that, because of the altered circumstances that must ensue for us both, she had been thus painfully affected.

But I was wrong in my conjecture. How can I here set down the dreadful truth that dawned upon me by slow degrees—my kind friend being careful to soften, by every means in her power, what she knew could not fail to crush me to the earth with sorrow and humiliation?

Some of the doctor's remarks, she said, had obliged her, very much against her will, to confide to him the secret of my marriage; and then it was that he had almost confirmed her in a fear with which, she admitted, both she and Mason had of late been haunted. Before this most miserable year came to its close, there was every reason to apprehend that I (surely one of the most miserable of wives) might be destined to become one of the most miserable of mothers. I buried my face in my hands and wept bitterly when I heard this. How differently I might have felt (I said to myself) in different circumstances! Had I been even the *widow* (for instance) of some man I

had loved and respected, how I should have rejoiced at the prospect of possessing a living reminder of the one who was no more! How eagerly I should have awaited the coming of the cherished being who would be likely to reproduce—in mind, in speech, or in feature—some attribute of the husband of my heart. But *now!* . . . "Alas" (I thought), "what have I done to deserve this new calamity?" and I recalled with horror the words which Mrs. Marks had said when she was congratulating me upon having no children.

How hard was the destiny that could compel me thus to nourish at my breast the offspring of one who was either a murderer or a madman! What possible consolation could I ever hope to derive in the future from bringing into this world of sorrow and temptation any such unfortunate child?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

I WILL not attempt to describe my misery when I came to realise more fully my unfortunate position. Miss Warden drove into Nice, and informed Mrs. Marks of the cause of my new unhappiness. They both agreed that it would be impossible for me, now, to continue to conceal my marriage. Nevertheless, I pleaded for a little longer delay, for I dreaded to tell my father of what I had done whilst his health was in such a critical condition. Even the doctor advised me to wait for a few days at least.

Sir Harry appeared, certainly, to take very little interest in me or my doings; but, like all invalids who suffer from

nervous illness, he was subject to strange alternations of temper, and his fits of violence and irritability were so injurious to him that we feared to run the risk of provoking one of them.

All anxiety upon this subject, however, was brought to an abrupt termination before I had made up my mind how and when I should communicate my dreadful news. A few days after the doctor's visit to me my father had another paralytic stroke. He was unconscious for nearly a week after this seizure. Then he rallied a little, and seemed to have something upon his mind which he tried hard to put into words. It was almost impossible, however, for us to understand what he said, his voice was so changed and weakened. At last Mason made out by the movement of his lips that he was asking for "Nelly,"—a name by which he had very seldom addressed me of late years. Generally, now, he alluded to me as "the child," or "the girl." When I came to his bed-side he nodded his head and appeared more satisfied. Then he talked for some time very indistinctly and incoherently, turning, from time to time, to some one whom he seemed to fancy was standing upon the other side of his bed. By listening with the greatest attention we thought we caught the words "not a bad sort of girl," and then he said, much more distinctly, "I will have no scandal; bear in mind, Courtenay! no cackling!"

"He fancies that he's speaking to the Colonel," whispered Mason, when he again turned to where he appeared to see an imaginary figure; "he is making up a marriage between Colonel Davenant and Miss Helen," and the poor woman sighed, feeling, no doubt, how useless it was to talk about this now. The doctor came in just then. He was surprised at his patient's animation.

"He is exciting himself about something," he said; "is there anything upon his mind?"

"He is wanting to make up a marriage," replied Mason,

in a low voice, "between Miss Helen"—by which name she had been told always to address me—"and her cousin Colonel Davenant. It was always intended in the family."

"You wish your daughter to marry her cousin Colonel Davenant?" asked the doctor, bending down over the sick man. Sir Harry nodded his head several times.

"Say that you are quite ready to do so," whispered the doctor, in my ear, "and then he will become easier in his mind."

I shrank away, instinctively, from the bed-side. "How can I possibly make the promise, *now?*" I murmured, bursting into tears.

"Promise him this," entreated the doctor; "should he recover, he will forget all about it."

I looked towards the bed, not knowing what to do. Sir Harry's eyes were fixed upon me with an expression, as I fancied, of almost fierce command. I quailed beneath their glance.

"Yes, yes," I faltered. "I promise! I promise that I will marry Courtenay Davenant, some day."

My father sank back upon his pillow as though intensely relieved. Three days afterwards he passed peacefully away, without having ever spoken intelligibly again.

Miss Warden and the doctor used every persuasion to prevent me from looking upon him after death, dreading the effect which might be produced upon me by so solemn a sight. I persisted, however, in my entreaties to be allowed to see him once more, and felt glad afterwards that I had done so. I observed upon the calm and peaceful face, whence all strife and bitterness seemed to have departed for ever, an expression which recalled the genial, kind-hearted, Sir Harry Davenant of the old time. I could believe, as I looked at him, that the man who lay there in the sleep of death was the same tender and indulgent father who used to play with me, and take me upon

his knee, in the days of my departed childhood, before the cloud which had grown out of his sorrow had obscured all that was bright and affectionate in his nature, and I felt that my recollection of him would be far less painful to me, in the future, from having looked upon him thus for the last time.

Before evening Miss Warden telegraphed to the family solicitor—Mr. Corbyn, by name—apprising him of Sir Harry's decease, asking for instructions, and begging him to communicate the news, at once, to Colonel Davenant, about whose present address we were uncertain.

The lawyer's reply arrived upon the following day. Sir Harry's body was to be conveyed to England for interment in the family vault. Colonel Davenant—who happened just now to be in London—would attend the funeral. My father's will was in the possession of his solicitors. I was to search, however, amongst the papers which he had taken with him abroad to see whether he had left any additional wishes in writing.

Acting upon these instructions I took the black leather dispatch-box—the only receptacle for private papers which Sir Harry had brought with him—into my bedroom, and began my search. I hoped to find here some memorial of my dead mother—a carefully-treasured letter, perhaps; a ring; a flower; or a ribband which she might once have worn; something which would give a truer insight regarding my father's heart than had been afforded by his strange behaviour ever since her decease. I possessed only two letters—quite short ones—in my mother's handwriting, which had been given me by Mason, and which I looked upon as my most precious treasures. They had been written by my mother when I was only two years old, and when she must have been absent from Northover for a few days upon a visit. Every line in these two letters breathed the tenderest maternal solicitude, and I was never tired of reading

them over. The handwriting was beautiful, though somewhat peculiar. I had taken it as a model for my own, and had succeeded, by dint of patient efforts at imitation, helped, it may be, by some inherited tendency, in writing almost exactly like her. It was upon some scrap of this characteristic handwriting that I was hoping to light now. Another letter, perhaps, which I might cherish with my other two treasures.

Alas, I found nothing that could comfort me in my desolation! I came, however, upon a very mysterious letter, written, apparently, shortly after my mother's death; after reading which I became a prey to the most agitating conjectures. It was written in French, a language in which my father had never been very proficient, and in order, I suppose, to make quite sure of its meaning, he had scribbled a rough translation—probably with the aid of a dictionary—upon the blank side of the paper upon which the letter was written. I give this in Sir Harry's own words:—

"SIR,

"In searching amongst the effects of miladi which you were good enough to give me, I found in the pocket of one of her morning dresses a letter to the address of a certain individual, which she must, probably, have forgotten to put to the post, having had, no doubt, the intention of doing so herself. Afterwards I fell upon two others. Thus I am possessed at this moment of three letters in all; and, as they are not letters to leave lying about (*à laisser traîner*), being somewhat compromising to miladi, I venture to appriso you, sir, of my discovery; and I wish to say that if you will have the obligingness to send me quite a small present—say fifty pounds sterling—I will lose no time in forwarding the letters to your address, so that there should be no ıear of the slightest scandal. I hope, sir, you will not accuse me of extortion

(*chantage*), because I have dared to put a price upon this little service. Believe me, it is not for myself that I desire to amass money; but I have a poor old mother who looked well after me when I was a little child, and now that she is '*en plein radotage*,' it is for her that I make my economies, so that she may want for nothing at the house of the doctor with whom I have placed her '*en pension*,' close to *Arras* in the *Pas-de-Calais*. I hope, therefore, *monsieur*, that you will have the goodness to honour me with an answer, and I beg you to accept my most respectful salutations.

"CELESTINE VIGON."

Celestine Vigon was the name of the French maid who had been with my mother at the time of her death. As I stood staring at her letter in utter bewilderment, I could recall her perfectly, although I had never beheld her since that time. A tall, dark young woman, with fine eyes, and regular, though somewhat massive, features. I remembered her long gold earrings; her straight, upright figure; her good-natured smile, and even white teeth. This woman, then (I said to myself), was none other than Madame Zoubiroff, the person who had been the Countess Dobrówolska's maid and *confidante;* who had pawned Dr. Bernard's amulet, and at whose lodging-house in Paris Mr. Marks had taken up his abode with the view of tracking out and bringing to justice his brother's murderer! How did this woman come to be in my poor mother's service? At whose recommendation had she been engaged? What were these three "compromising" letters which she asserted that she had discovered amongst her late mistress's things, and for which she demanded the exorbitant sum of fifty pounds?

By-and-by a terrible light broke in upon me. Did not Mrs. Marks say that Madame Dobrowolska had placed her French maid as a spy in the house of her "English

rival"? and did not Mr. Marks suspect that Madame Dobrowolska and her creature had had a hand in this English rival's death? Was my poor mother this "English rival"? In whose affections could she ever have sought to rival the Countess? For some time my mind was too stunned and confused to admit of my thinking reasonably. Then I set myself to work out, as calmly and collectedly as I could, the mystery that confronted me.

Miss Warden's absurd phrase, "the plot is thickening," recurred to me in spite of myself, as such trivialities will recur, sometimes at inappropriate moments. How fond she was of saying this in the days when nothing whatever used to happen! The "plot" was certainly "thickening" now, however, with a vengeance!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THIS is how I endeavoured, in my ignorance, to explain the strange and dramatic incidents of the case:—

My father, Sir Harry Davenant, of Northover Park, I said to myself (the "Englishman in a good position"), had somehow and somewhere (in Paris or in London, perhaps) fallen in with Madame Dobrowolska after his marriage to my mother. A flirtation of some kind had ensued, which upon his side was not serious. Madame Dobrowolska, however, had fallen in love seriously with my father . . .

To any one who had known him when he was a younger and a happier man this would not have seemed impossible. Only that very morning Mason had remarked, upon

looking on him in death how handsome and good-tempered he used to be when she had first entered his service; how different in every respect from the changed being we had known in later years. It seemed unlikely, certainly, that after his marriage to my mother, to whom he had appeared to be so thoroughly devoted, he should have paid attentions to any other woman, or concealed for a single day the fact that he was no longer a bachelor. But Madame Dobrowolska, perhaps, might have made the first advances. She did not seem to be a person who would have behaved in an over-delicate manner.

At that time, too, she was said to have been exceedingly beautiful; and in the presence of an exceedingly beautiful woman who is displaying all her powers of fascination, men are said to be often exceedingly weak! Then again, she possessed the gift of dominating people mesmerically . . .

Sir Harry might have been tempted, therefore, into going further than he had intended by the wiles of this wicked and deceitful syren. But then, his better nature had triumphed, and he had fled from her and returned to my mother. He had left her mad with anger and jealousy and wounded pride, and she had set to work to think upon some plan of revenge.

Somehow—it would be hopeless at this distance of time to conjecture as to who could have been her accomplices, she had managed to introduce her unscrupulous emissary into my mother's household as lady's-maid. Celestine Vigon (alias "Madame Zoubiroff") seemed to be one of those terrible women who, whilst preserving a smiling and unruffled exterior, and a conscience ever ready to absolve, by reason of the pretended benevolence of their ulterior motives, are capable of committing the most horrible crimes. I had read, only quite lately, that just such another woman had poisoned a whole family in a quiet little French village—the cradle, as one might

have imagined, of Arcadian innocence and simplicity—for the sake of a sum which scarcely exceeded five francs. Who could say to what fatal lengths Celestine's insatiable greed of gain—or as she would prefer, of course, to designate it, her exemplary devotion to her aged mother at Arras—might not have tempted her to proceed? I grew cold and faint at heart as I pondered on the horrible possibilities that lay shrouded in the obscurity of the past!

After awhile, however, I went on with my meditations.

My mother then, my beatiful, tender mother, was dead and gone. If she had been hurried by foul means to her nameless grave I prayed that I might never be made aware of it. The suspicion of any such tragedy was terrible enough, the certainty of it I felt would almost kill me! At this moment, when my mental and physical powers of endurance were being taxed to the utmost, I would endeavour to drive from me any such agonising suspicion.

My father, then, was now a widower; his young wife was dead and buried. Her face, as Madame Dobrowolska (that fiend in human shape!) had written to her servant and spy, was hidden away from his eyes for ever! But then (fortunately for my father at least) Madame Dobrowolska was married to another. He had gone abroad immediately after his wife's funeral. Did he fall in again, during his rovings, with the terrible Polish Countess, and crave for her sympathy and friendship in his desolate and forlorn condition? and had this *rapprochement* re-inspired her with hope and lured her on to the commission of a diabolical crime?

Perhaps all this would account for the strange interest which Hugo had manifested in me upon the first occasion of our meeting. His curiosity had probably been excited at learning, as he might have learnt from Mr. Collingwood, that I was the daughter of the man who had been

beloved by his sister. This no doubt, apart from any newly-awakened sentiment for me, was what had made him wish to visit Northover, the old English country-house of which his sister had once hoped to become the mistress. Then, too, when we were married, he had dreaded apprising his sister of the step he had taken. I seemed to perceive now, that this was because he feared some outburst of violence upon the part of the woman who had always dominated him, and because, too, he knew that, do what I would to conciliate her, she would certainly detest me as the daughter of the man who had seemed to despise her love, and of the woman who had been so evidently preferred to herself. There were two or three circumstances which appeared, indeed, to be somewhat opposed to these ingenious surmises.

My father had always cherished quite an insular prejudice against foreigners, and I had never heard that, previous to the death of my mother, he had ever remained away from home for any length of time by himself. I could be sure of nothing, however, which might have happened so long ago, and although Madame Dobrowolska was certainly a foreigner, Hugo had often told me that she spoke English perfectly, and that she was tall and fair—like an Englishwoman. My second doubt, as to the correctness of my own theories, was occasioned by the remembrance that, when my father had learnt the Prince's name for the first time, he had betrayed no sign of its having been previously familiar to him; whereas Madame Dobrowolska, in the course of their intimacy, would certainly have mentioned this favourite brother, who's name, "like the crackling of a bag of biscuits" (as Mr. Collingwood had remarked), was not one that could be easily forgotten. I surmounted this difficulty, however, by recollecting that people did not generally allude to near relations by their formal titles. The Prince's sister would have spoken of him familiarly as "Hugo," or "my brother,"

and as she was then Madame Dobrowolska, my father might never have heard mention of the family name, and if he had, it was not unnatural, considering the state of his mind, that he should have forgotten it. He had seemed, indeed, to have forgotten so many more important things!

It was almost impossible for me, after the flight of years, and in my present state of misery and distress, to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion respecting the three letters referred to by Celestine Vigon. These were the same letters, I assumed, which were mentioned by Madame Dobrowolska, as having been sent to her by her emissary —letters which had evidently been abstracted by Celestine in order that they might be submitted—for some evil purpose, no doubt—to her unscrupulous employer, and which, that evil purpose having been served, she was desirous of selling to my father. I endeavoured to recall the precise words which had been made use of by the Countess in her letter to her *confidante*. She had been very foolish—she wrote—to re-marry so soon: "But after the three letters you sent me, what was there to hope?"

The letters, then, must have been calculated to destroy the Countess's hopes, letters which, for some reason, had induced her to re-marry? One would have fancied, with any ordinary woman, that once a man was married to anybody else all hope would have perished as a matter of course. But Madame Dobrowolska was anything but an ordinary woman. She believed in the power of her will, as well as in that of her beauty, and in spite of my father's wife, she may have hoped to obtain an empire over his heart. These letters—possibly from my mother to some friend—may have expatiated upon her husband's tenderness and devotion to her, and upon the happiness of her married life. After reading them, at any rate, Madame Dobrowolska's hopes were completely shattered, and, in a fit of pique, she had consented to marry the Jewish professor.

Had the letters been of any real importance my father would assuredly have endeavoured to buy them back, in spite of the price which Celestine had demanded; whereas he had merely made upon the outside of the envelope the following memorandum in pencil:—

"Attempt at extortion—'*Chantage*.' Advised her to apply elsewhere.—H. D."

As there was nothing more of any interest in my father's dispatch-box, I locked it up again, keeping possession, however of Celestine's letter, which I subsequently showed to Miss Warden.

Whilst admitting that it was, certainly, a very strange coincidence that Madame Zoubiroff and my mother's maid, Celestine Vigon, should have turned out to be one and the same person, she endeavoured to make light of my terrible suspicions. My husband's arrest, she declared, had given such a shock to my nerves that I was inclined to suspect foul play where nothing of the kind had existed. Celestine, she said, had evidently been, at one time, in Madame Dobrowolska's service, and was probably recommended to my mother by some one who knew that she was a clever maid. I had no positive proof that she had been placed with my mother as a spy. She had written and received gossiping letters, no doubt, as servants frequently did, and, after my mother's death, being a grasping, calculating woman, she had endeavoured to extort money from Sir Harry upon some ridiculous pretence, which he had very properly treated with the contempt it deserved.

I felt that my kind friend said all this merely to reassure me, as she was now in great anxiety respecting my health. I promised her, however, that I would try not to dwell, more than I could help, upon so distressing a subject; but, do what I would, I could not succeed in banishing it entirely from my mind.

I was somewhat cheered, in the afternoon of this same day, at receiving a telegram from my godfather. It expressed as much sympathy as the cramped space would admit of. He had been travelling night and day, having been summoned to the death-bed of his own father, and, upon his return home, had been informed of Sir Harry's decease.

Miss Warden also received a separate telegram from him at the same time. It ran as follows:

"Please inform me if report of Prince C.'s arrest is true."

Before the day was an hour older Miss Warden and I had decided upon a plan of action. It seemed impossible any longer to stand alone, encompassed as we were by all these webs of mystery. Mr. Collingwood, now Lord Silchester, had bogged me to apply to him if I should ever stand in need of a friend, and I had promised him that I would do so. I stood in bitter need of a friend now. Miss Warden consented to go to England in charge of Sir Harry's body, and when there she would seek an interview with my godfather, and inform him of all the misery I had endured—of all that I was likely to endure in the future. *I*, in the meanwhile, was to remain on where I was, under the care of Mason, until she returned, and we were then to go together to whatever place my godfather should advise, where my unhappy situation would not be likely to excite ill-natured comment.

CHAPTER XXX.

When Miss Warden arrived at Northover she found that my cousin Courtenay was expected upon the following day. We had previously settled that it would be better for her to avoid an interview with him if possible, in order

that no inquiries might be made respecting myself—inquiries which it would be difficult, in the existing circumstances, to answer. She begged the servants, therefore, not to inform him of her arrival, pleading the fatigue consequent upon her hurried journey as her reason for not wishing to see him.

She wrote to me, however, that she had seen "Sir Courtenay" in church, upon the occasion of my poor father's funeral, and described him as "tall, rather dark, but with blue eyes and a most charming expression." "Ah, Helen!" she added in her letter, "if only the 'family marriage project' could have taken place before all these terrible misfortunes had come to pass! But, alas! it is no good thinking about this now!"

My cousin had walked back through the park with Mr. Corbyn, the family lawyer, whilst Miss Warden had driven by the road, and by this means a meeting had been avoided, as he had left for London upon the evening of the same day. Mr. Corbyn, having business to transact with the land-agent upon the morrow, remained for the night, and had dined with Miss Warden *en tête-à-tête*. He told her that my cousin had been extremely sorry to hear of my indisposition, for I had given out that I was not well enough to bear the return journey, that he had spoken of me with the greatest kindness, and was anxious to conform to my wishes upon every subject. Mr. Corbyn said that he was uncertain, as yet, whether my cousin would be able to keep up the gardens and establishment at Northover House in the same style as heretofore. He fancied that, for the first few years at least, Sir Courtenay would probably shut the place up, as he did not mean to abandon his profession, and the appointment he held would oblige him to live a good deal abroad. The lawyer had then alluded to "the family marriage project." He said that, from the manner in which Sir Courtenay had inquired after "Miss Helen," he hoped that it might one

day be brought about, as it would be greatly to the advantage of all parties, not to mention the estate, which would also benefit materially by the arrangement.

Miss Warden, knowing how utterly I had placed myself beyond the reach of any such "advantage," endeavoured to impress upon Mr. Corbyn that it was entirely out of the question, and stated that she had heard that my cousin himself had been the first to abandon the notion. In spite of all she could say, however, Mr. Corbyn persisted in alluding to the marriage as an event which might come to pass "later on." "Sir Courtenay," he said, "had particularly begged that Miss Helen would not hurry her departure, but that, on her return from the Continent, she would take up her abode at her old home, and remain on there as long as was convenient to her."

Perhaps—Mr. Corbyn said—Sir Courtenay might have to "run down" now and then, before "Miss Helen" had settled upon a new home, and perhaps "these frequent meetings between the two young people might end in preventing Miss Helen from ever having to look out for a new home at all."

Poor Miss Warden, acting ever as my true friend, wrote me word that she felt perfectly miserable when she heard all this, because she so thoroughly agreed with Mr. Corbyn in the matter, and felt equally convinced that if ever my cousin and I were brought together in such romantic circumstances, we could not possibly avoid "falling in love with one another then and there!" For this very reason, however, and on account of what she termed my "unhappy complications," it was highly important that no meeting of the kind should take place. She told Mr. Corbyn, therefore, that the doctors had ordered me to remain for some time longer abroad, as my nerves were much shattered by the loss I had just sustained; that my plans were very unsettled as yet, but that on my return to England she fancied that I should

probably decide to live in London. She had spoken thus vaguely as to my future, not knowing at what moment it might not become absolutely necessary for me to declare my marriage, and being anxious to avoid making more false statements than the exigencies of the case required.

"And so," she concluded in her letter, "Mr. Corbyn will be sure to tell Sir Courtenay, when he sees him in London, that you don't want to have anything to do with him—that you won't consult him, or trust him, or treat him even like a relation, and that you refuse to avail yourself of his kind offer that you should remain on at your old home! But for all the terrible obstacles that have arisen to prevent it, this would be the very way to further Mr. Corbyn's wish!"

I felt sincerely grateful to Miss Warden for the line she had taken. I could get on quite well, even in my present desolate position, without the sympathy and assistance of my cousin Courtenay, and I was not sorry that he should be made to realise this. When I was living my solitary, secluded life at Northover, and when, had he so willed it, he and I might, perhaps, have become friends, he had never condescended to come near me; and now that he was master of the place it was not likely that I should accept his patronage! I was proud, even in the midst of my bitter humiliation; and by some process of prejudiced feminine reasoning, I had associated Courtenay Davenant with all my misfortunes. If he had not spoken so lightly and contemptuously (I said to myself) about the possibility of our marriage; if he had not discarded the notion of it without any kind of appeal to my inclinations, without even wishing to know what I was like in the face, I might not have been so willing to listen to Prince Crecszoleski's proposals. Thus eagerly do we often seek to fasten upon others the responsibility of our own rashness!

As soon as Mr. Corbyn had departed from Northover,

Miss Warden wrote to my godfather, and begged that he would have the kindness to call upon her, in order that she might consult him with regard to my future plans. He came to Northover accordingly, and remained with her for nearly the whole of one afternoon. It was with the greatest difficulty, she said, that she had summoned courage to tell him everything. She thought, however, that it would be wrong to make any concealments from so old a friend, and that it would be impossible for him to advise us unless he knew the whole truth. She confessed now that, although she had begun by fancying that my godfather must have been in love with me, she did not think this now. He seemed to be so genuinely distressed at the story of my misfortunes that there could be no doubt whatever of his affection; but with this distress there had mingled so much regret at the knowledge that no marriage could now take place between my cousin and myself, that she had come to the conclusion that his love for me was more like that of a parent—the very kind of love, as she truly remarked, of which I stood the most in need at this miserable time!.

But for the press of business consequent upon his accession to his father's title and estates, Miss Warden thought that this devoted friend would have proposed returning with her to Nice. He said to her very earnestly at parting, "Some people make these promises". (the promises made by godfathers and godmothers) "quite lightly; and fancy, when they've given the child a silver mug, or a fork and spoon, that they've done all that is required of them. But I look upon my responsibilities in a much more serious light. Dearest Helen is an orphan. Both her parents are now no more. It is for me to replace them to the very best of my power. From the point of view in which I look at the matter, she has now become, as it were, my own child, and it is my bounden duty to care for her, and look after her, and to comfort and sup-

port her, as far as I can, during all the trouble and suffering which may be to come."

Miss Warden said that, as he spoke thus, there were tears in his eyes; and, being one of the most tender-hearted of women, she admitted that she had wept likewise.

My godfather listened with horror to the particulars connected with Hugo's arrest. All he already knew was, that the Prince had been conveyed to St. Petersburg, upon suspicion of his being concerned in some crime, which he had concluded must be an "*affaire politique.*" The paragraph which announced this fact consisted merely of a few lines in a French newspaper. He had read it whilst travelling post-haste upon his way to England, whither he had been summoned on account of his father's illness, and he had had no confirmation of the news until he had received Miss Warden's reply to his telegram of enquiry.

At mention of Madame Dobrowolska, and of her suspected connection with her husband's murder, Lord Silchester had appeared to be overwhelmed with horror and amazement. It was evident, however, Miss Warden said, that he could never have entertained a very high opinion of her, for, upon being informed that she had disappeared and could nowhere be found, he exclaimed "Thank God!" with the greatest fervour, after which he added:

"My chief fear connected with this marriage, for I had never heard a word against the character of the Prince, arose from the thought that Helen might some day become intimately acquainted with this dangerous woman, who seemed to have obtained such an ascendancy over the mind of her brother. *Now*, however, I sincerely hope that they may never be brought together. They must not meet if we can possibly prevent it!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

By the middle of the month of May we found ourselves established at a spot which, had I been under happier conditions of mind and body, would have appeared to me like an earthly paradise. "We," consisted of Miss Warden, Mason, and myself, accompanied by a courier who had been engaged for us by my godfather in London.

Lord Silchester, as I must now call him, had received permission to extend the period of his leave upon succeeding to the family title and estates. He had some thought, he said, of retiring altogether from the diplomatic service, but had, as yet, made no definite plans upon this subject. He came out to us at the end of June, to the place which he had selected as our summer retreat, in order, as he had said to Miss Warden, that he might comfort and support me during all the trouble and suffering that was to come.

Mrs. Marks had called upon me again to bid me farewell before she left Nice. As she was departing, she took from the handbag which she seemed always to carry, a small packet sealed up in paper.

"I told Mr. Marks," she said, "of your unhappy position, and of how distressed you were about it. He has written to me begging me to remind you, for comfort, that King Solomon maintained that a wicked father might sometimes beget a righteous son, as it is written, 'Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir-tree,' and he also commissioned me to give you this jewel. Prince Crecszoleski, on hearing that it had not been claimed by his sister, desired that it might be delivered to his 'beloved wife,' to be handed down to his posterity, as it was a family heir-loom, of which his sister had taken possession, and which had belonged to his mother, and Mr. Marks has obtained permission from the Russian officials to comply with this request."

I took the packet, broke open the seals, and gazed with mingled horror and admiration at Madame Dobrowolska's jewel. It was a brooch and pendant combined, the upper part being formed of a square emerald of magnificent colour and size surrounded by beautiful diamonds, whilst the drop which was attached to it consisted of a large pear-shaped emerald polished "*en cabochon*." It was a princely ornament indeed; but I could not repress a shudder as I looked at it and thought of all the horrors with which it had been associated. Nevertheless, as it was a family jewel which had belonged once to Hugo's mother, it was but right and just that it should one day become the property of Hugo's child.

I thanked Mrs. Marks with tears in my eyes, tears begotten of a variety of conflicting emotions, and, as soon as she had departed, I locked up the ornament in my jewel-case, registering a silent vow that nothing should ever induce me to wear it.

As I had pleaded that my marriage to the Prince might be kept a secret, at any rate until after the birth of my child, we were constrained, upon our way to the place which I have alluded to as an earthly paradise, to lose all traces of our former identity. I became, therefore, for the time being, "Mrs. Warden," a young lady who had recently been left a widow, and who was shortly expected to be joined by her father; Miss Warden being supposed to be a near relative of my late husband. Lord Silchester, upon joining us, was described merely as "Mr. Collingwood," without any distinguishing prefix, and by means of all these precautions, and by avoiding the resorts which are usually patronized by British tourists, we hoped, as the summer was now so far advanced, altogether to escape observation.

I know not whether the retreat in which we established ourselves is still in existence or not. The position of the smiling valley, the three torrents which met and mingled

their waters together in a broader and bolder stream; the near mountains, pink with rhododendron, and waving with flowery grasses; the far off peaks, clad in their eternal snows;—might enable me, no doubt, to discover this cradle of lingering memories; but I cannot say how far the ravages of an encroaching civilisation, more baneful often in its effects than even desolation or decay, may have changed or distorted its aspect. Some day (I often say to myself) I must go and seek for what was once so lovely and so secluded a spot, for there is a peaceful little "acre of earth" hard by, that I should like to look upon once again before I pass away and am no more seen! As yet, however, I have not been able to carry out this intention.

At the time of which I am writing the ancient monastery of St. Dalmas de Tende (or "*di Tenda*," as it should more properly be called) stood in the centre of a broad and smiling valley, through which wound the picturesque highway, leading on the one hand to Nice (some two days' journey by the easy stages at which we had proceeded), and on the other, to the zig-zag which conveys the traveller over the "Col de Tende," and thence down into the fertile plains of Piedmont.

The monks, who had at one time occupied the convent (a wealthy white-robed order, altogether unlike the poor brown garmented Franciscans who begged of us sometimes during our walks abroad), were now dispersed, and their religious house, having been taken by an enterprising German physician, had been transformed into a combination of private hotel and *kurhaus*, for the accommodation of patients requiring mountain air and complete mental repose. It was too "far from the maddening crowd," however—in other words, what most people might have considered too dull—to be a financial success, in spite of its delicious air and its lovely scenery; and at the time of our arrival the only other visitor at the establishment was

an old snuff-taking Piedmontese professor, who departed for Turin upon the following day.

Notwithstanding the precautions we had taken to preserve our incognito we discovered that we were generally described by the servants of the hotel as a "*milor Anglais et sa famille.*" Those to whom we were thus described, however, were merely birds of passage, Italian tourists, who halted for breakfast or early dinner, on their way to gayer scenes, and even these, as the weather grew warmer, became fewer and fewer, until by the month of June we had the place entirely to ourselves.

The scenery by which we were now surrounded was different, in its wild beauty, from that to which we had been lately accustomed. Instead of the grey olives, rising one above another from the rich red earth of the hill-side, built up into artificial terraces, and teeming with many-coloured flowers, huge chestnut-trees, hollow with age, upraised their gnarled and twisted limbs from sward as smooth and soft as that of an English lawn. The lean little parti-coloured sheep and goats, which with their attendant shepherds were often the only living creatures we encountered in our rambles, had cropped it down to the consistency of velvet, whilst the mountain torrents kept it fresh and green even during the period of the summer heat.

The perpetual noise made by these rushing and foaming torrents, which was somewhat disturbing at first, ended, just because of its being perpetual, by soothing my shattered nerves. Nothing, I think, could ever so vividly recall the impressions and experiences of this time as the surging and seething sound of a mountain stream, as it goes hurrying and blustering upon its seaward way. I hardly know, in fact, whether I should ever dare to trust myself to listen to one again!

All the grass, however, had not been browsed into green velvet. Down by the broader river, which towards

the middle of the valley received these brawling tributaries, there grew a wealth of waving meadow-grass, reaching, when I used to stand amongst it, so far above my waist that the tall ox-daisies and pink fox-gloves and the star-eyes of yellow ranunculus and white narcissus would seem to look up at me in kindly greeting; whilst all the many-coloured butterflies that hovered above them would flutter about my head, and brush my cheeks with their joyous wings.

Amongst the rifts and crannies of the great rocks that had been washed down from the neighbouring mountains, grew rare ferns and mosses and beautiful Alpine flowers, the names of which were quite unknown to me. Lilies of the valley, too, and wild strawberries were plentiful. Little sun-browned peasant children, with bare feet, would bring us baskets of these strawberries from the hill-sides, which were rosy with dwarf rhododendron, growing too high up for me to venture now. Beyond this, again, were the black fir-trees, beneath the shade of which one could imagine that hungry wolves might prowl from time to time; and then, far away, with a pink glow upon them at sunset, rose the snowy Alpine peaks, looking like the tents of some phantom host, pitched in the realms of faëry. I used often to gaze at the shining white peaks of this mysterious region, and wonder whether they had ever been explored by the foot of man. Chamois-hunters, perhaps, ventured up there sometimes; and then a verse of an old song, which I had read in one of my mother's music-books at Northover, would recur to my mind:—

> "O'er mountains bright with snow and light,
> We crystal-hunters speed along,
> Whilst rocks and caves and icy waves,
> Each instant echo to our song;"

So perhaps the crystal-hunters, as well, may have climbed up thus far, singing blithely as they sort after Alpine

amethyst and topaz. Did it make men nobler and better —I wondered—to soar so far above the heads of their fellows, and to look down at life from beyond the reach of the tainted breath of cities? I should have felt nobler and better, and happier, too, I used to think, even from gazing up at these pure white peaks from below, but for the wretched memories that oppressed me continually! As it was, even, I was grateful to have been permitted to dwell every day upon scenes which were so fair and so tranquil. I should have been far more miserable, I fancy, in any less beautiful spot.

My godfather was certainly one of the most agreeable companions in the world. He possessed that kind of nature—a source of happiness to himself and others—which enabled him to feel an interest in almost everything. His mind appeared always to derive its sustenance from what was nearest at hand; unlike some people I have met with since, who have been inclined to grumble idly whenever they have imagined that nothing within reach was worthy of their notice. I should not have expected that one who had been accustomed to the amusements of courts, and great cities, would have seemed to be so perfectly contented with the peaceful distractions of our mountain retreat; nor had I been aware before that he was such an enthusiastic admirer of the beauties of nature. In the morning it was his habit to rise early and to start off upon long expeditions amongst the surrounding mountains. He climbed very nearly as high as the chamois-hunters and crystal-hunters of my imagination, but by the time that we were ready to go out he was nearly always at hand to accompany us. We used to pass nearly the whole day in the open air, sitting or loitering about under the shade of the spreading chestnut-trees when the sun was at its hottest, and only taking our longer walks in the early morning or the cool of the evening.

I used to sketch a good deal at this time, and my god-

father, hoping, no doubt, to distract my mind from sadder subjects, was always wont to encourage me in my artistic efforts. I was looking, only the other day, at a sketch I did at about this time, of the picturesque little village of Briga, which nestled hard by against the blue mountain amongst a grove of mulberry-trees. Brown, low, little houses, built of rough stones, piled one on top of the other apparently without mortar or cement, unglazed windows, and floors of the bare brown earth. A narrow, brown, little street, brown men in brown coats, driving and riding brown mules. Brown women, washing white clothes at a blue stream. A white church, with a belfry of brown tiles, full of hammering, clamouring bells. A little *place* outside the church, planted at regular intervals with mulberry and ilex-trees, and set round with heavy stone benches. Some brown beggars, brown Franciscans, and a stout, round-faced, village *padre*, in well-worn *soutane*, are grouped about in this open space. Then, to the left, upon a gentle hill-slope, lies a little graveyard with brown crosses, white crosses—all hung over with garlands and little pictures of saints. I remember that I painted my picture entirely in different shades of brown and blue—sepia and cobalt—laying on the darker shadows, and my *padre's soutane*, with a mixture of the two, and dashing in a touch of Chinese white here and there, to indicate the high lights and the snow upon the far mountains, and that these few colours were sufficient to produce the effects I desired to obtain.

I daresay that this sketch would only convey a very hazy impression of the place it attempts to portray to those who have never visited it, but, to me, every touch of the brush is replete with memories. I can recall with the utmost vividness not only the spot itself but all the thoughts, the fears, the unacknowledged hopes, that came crowding upon me whilst I sat on my camp-stool by the roadside and washed in my colours! I had taken up my

position, I remember, just within the shadow of a kind of natural grotto, so as to be protected from the glare of the sun. Above me, an overhanging layer of rock jutted out from the mountain, which, I remember thinking, might at any moment have fallen and crushed me where I sat, but I remember thinking, also, that I should not have cared very much whether it had crushed me or not!

God bless you, peaceful little Alpine hamlet! I say to myself whenever I look back thus into the past. God bless your brown herdsmen, their wives, their little ones, their innocent browsing flocks, the chamois-hunters, and the crystal-hunters, that explore the far-off region of the eternal snows; God bless the kind old *padre* of Briga, the brown Franciscan friars, and the poor mendicants that crouch beside the open door of the village church! And then, the little graveyard on the sunny slope of the blue hill-side . . . But, whenever I think of this, and look at the sketch I made of its poor little company of wooden crosses, some of them, because of the undulating ground, leaning all upon one side, their arms, as it were, stretched forth in pathetic appeal, as though entreating that they may not be altogether forgotten, the tears come into my eyes so fast that they overflow and drop down upon the paper before I can prevent it, so that they have very nearly spoilt my sketch.

CHAPTER XXXII.

My little boy, "George," as we christened him in our hurry, lies now in that peaceful Alpine burying-ground.

It may appear strange, perhaps, that I should have lamented the loss of what I had so little desired; but the maternal instinct is often responsible for many seeming

inconsistencies. To those to whom the great mystery of maternity has been revealed, all women who are strangers to its emotions must seem to be wanting in some sort of sixth sense. Such women, no doubt, may wonder why I did not experience a feeling of unmixed relief at the death of my baby; but all true mothers will understand that it is possible to lament alike at the cradle and at the grave of a first-born son.

I will try to record the events of this never-to-be-forgotten time in the order in which they took place. It was the 27th of August, and my godfather had set off early in the morning, accompanied by a guide, in order to see the sun rise upon Monte Rosa, and the higher Alps, from the summit of the Col de Tende. When we went out, at nine o'clock, he had not yet returned. Knowing by which road he would come, however, we strolled leisurely towards the town of Tenda, keeping under the shade of the trees, but within sight of the highway. At a turn of the road, not far from that which led to the village of Briga, we sat down to rest upon a stone bench by the wayside; and, as the view in front of us was lovely in the extreme, I thought I would wile away the time by making a sketch. Whilst I was thus occupied, Miss Warden whispered to me that two strangers were approaching, who looked like Englishmen; and she advised me to let down my white gauze veil, so that they might not recognise me, supposing that I ever fell in with them again in the future. I did as she suggested, and looked down fixedly at my drawing-book whilst they went by. After they had passed us we scrutinised their backs with attention. One—the shorter of the two—was certainly an Englishman. His clothes, his manner of walking, were alike characteristic of the Briton. About his companion—a tall, dark man, wearing blue spectacles—we could not feel quite so sure. He looked, we thought, more like a Spaniard or an Italian.

As I was gazing after these two retreating figures, I was conscious of a slight movement at my feet; and, looking down, beheld, to my intense horror, an enormous black snake, gliding slowly over a trailing fold of my dress, having apparently crept, unperceived, from a crevice in the rock at our backs. It was a much larger snake than I had ever seen before in a wild state. The frequent presence of the snake was, in my opinion, a serious drawback to this Alpine paradise; but those that we had hitherto encountered were not larger than the English hunting-snake of my native woods; whereas this one was of a length and breadth such as I should not have expected to behold out of the tropics. Both Miss Warden and I started up from the seat simultaneously, uttering involuntary cries of terror. The two pedestrians, hearing our screams, turned back and hurried to our assistance. They were just in time to see the cause of our alarm gliding across the dusty white road. The Englishman rushed after it; and, just as it was about to take refuge in the crannies of a loose stone wall, succeeded in despatching it with his walking-stick. Both the strangers, addressing us in French, then expressed their hopes that we had not been seriously alarmed. Probably they took us for French women, because we had bought our summer dresses at Nice, which may have lent us a somewhat Parisian air; and we endeavoured, in replying to them, not to do away with this illusion. The snake, they assured us, from its large size, was perfectly harmless it was only vipers—quite small snakes—that were venomous. I was so frightened, however, that I could do little more than murmur my thanks, incoherently, for their prompt assistance. My white veil was still over my face, whilst Miss Warden, like the taller stranger, wore blue spectacles as a protection from the glare. We fervently hoped, therefore, that our defenders might not recognise us if we were ever destined to fall in with them again.

They had scarcely bowed and resumed their onward way, when we saw Lord Silchester coming towards us from the opposite direction. He seemed fatigued with his mountaineering; and, upon joining us, flung himself upon the grass at the side of the bench. To hide my agitation I began collecting my sketching-materials, which had been scattered upon the ground when I had started up in my fright. But my godfather soon perceived that there was something amiss; and we then informed him of our adventure, and of the chivalrous behaviour of the two strangers. He appeared to be much annoyed when he heard that they had spoken to us.

"I know one of them quite well," he said, "little Montagu-Morrison, the greatest gossip and mischief-maker in the whole diplomatic service! I fell in with him early this morning, and could see that he was burning with curiosity to discover my whereabouts. He was the very last man I expected to meet, having heard that he had just been appointed to St. Petersburg. It turns out, however, that he's staying on at Turin, his old post, for a little while longer; and, during the hot weather, is making an Alpine tour with an Italian friend. I wish Fate had guided his footsteps in some other direction! However, I don't suppose we shall come upon him again, and it's very fortunate that he did not meet us when we were all together. He will not have any reason to connect you with me."

We walked back slowly to the *hospice*. I was still faint and trembling from the fright I had experienced, which seemed to have affected me to an extraordinary degree.

Attached to the convent, and standing just outside its principal gateway, was a kind of restaurant—a modern addition in the form of a Swiss *châlet*—for the refreshment of passing travellers. As we came within sight of this *châlet* we perceived, to our annoyance, the Englishman and his Italian friend seated at a small table beneath the

verandah—having evidently just ordered their breakfast. Had we entered the hotel by the way we intended we must have passed quite close to them. We continued our way, therefore, along the dusty high road, holding our white umbrellas carefully over our heads, and hoping that we were not being scrutinised by the reposing wayfarers; and then, turning into the long grass by the broader river, walked up through the garden to the entrance of our own rooms.

This extra walk in the hot sun fatigued me dreadfully. Lord Silchester was still worried about the close proximity of his English acquaintance. Mason was commissioned to find out from the hotel servants whether the tourists were expected to remain for the night. The answer she brought back was unsatisfactory. She knew no language but her own, of which the servants understood very little. They seemed to know nothing about the new-comers, she said—and she had not liked to question them too much.

Feeling very tired, Mason advised me to lie down in my bed-room. Here I fell into a troubled sleep, haunted by terrible dreams from which the great black snake was never entirely absent. I seemed to be for ever treading upon it, unawares, or finding it coiled up where I least expected it; and then I fancied that the child I was hoping, yet dreading, ere long, to bring into the world, had assumed this horrible shape.

When I awoke, I could not divest myself of this dreadful notion. I rang the bell for Mason, who had assisted at my own birth, and to whom I looked as an authority in such matters, and asked her whether anything so terrible had ever been known to occur.

She made light of my fears, forced me to partake of some nourishment, and did her utmost to soothe and reassure me. Without my knowledge, however, she sent to beg the doctor to hold himself in readiness to minister to me during "the great pain and peril of childbirth."

Although the birth of my son, as I have been since told, very nearly cost me my life, I can say almost to a moment when he was born into the world; because, in the midst of my misery, above the continuous rushing of the mountain torrents, I heard the great convent clock, set up over the entrance to the old refectory, beginning to boom forth, when, just at about the third or forth deliberate stroke, I became aware, suddenly, of another sound which surely no mother has ever heard for the first time without a thrill of grateful wonderment, as though at the accomplishment of a miracle—the "bairn's first greet," of which I had so often read in the old Border ballads, before I knew in the least what the phrase really meant—the plaintive expostulation of a helpless and irresponsible creature, cast forth, thus, without warning or preparation, into a chilly and unfamiliar world. And all the while the great clock of the convent went booming on so many times that I knew it could not be any other hour but midnight, although I was in no mood to count the number of the strokes.

"It is a little boy," I heard somebody saying, "with a face as beautiful as an angel's."

Then it seemed to me that all anguish, and fear, and bitterness, died out of my heart; and that I was possessed, instead, by a feeling of peace and holy contentment. With those infant cries still ringing in my ears, and before the pulsations of the great clock had entirely subsided—lulled by the rushing of many waters—I passed into a state of waking slumber, or semi-unconsciousness, during the whole of which I could not fairly lose myself in sleep "for joy that a man was born into the world."

The doctor had given me a soothing draught, and I suppose this was what made my slumber so unlike any other I had ever experienced.

My room had once formed part of an ancient chapel. I had been told this when it had been apportioned to me, as

being larger and more commodious than the other bedrooms of the establishment, which were simply the cells of its former occupants, whitewashed, and furnished in the most primitive fashion. It seemed, now, as I lay thus, between sleeping and waking, to turn into a chapel again, and sounds, as of sacred music, came wafted to me from afar. The kind old priest, too, of the village of Briga, with whom we had conversed upon the day when I had made the sketch, seemed to be moving to and fro between me and the shaded candles. All the while I was murmuring to myself, half aloud, that my child had been born with the face of an angel, and that the great black snake had been frightened away for ever. Then, as I was repeating this over and over again, I fancied that I saw angels floating down through the fretted ceiling of the room, with soft, dove-like wings and golden tresses, and that one of them took up my baby, whose head leant, quite limp and listless, against her bosom; and I thought that I was glad to see my little one in such safe keeping.

When I woke up it was broad daylight, only the green blinds had been pulled down. I asked to see my baby. Miss Warden and Mason both looked as if they had been crying. The old priest of Briga came out of the adjoining sitting-room when he heard my voice. I wondered to see him there, and asked myself whether what I had beheld had been, indeed, altogether a dream.

The old *padre* then told me, in bad Italian, that my baby had gone back to dwell with the angels of God. Somehow, this did not come to me either as a shock or a surprise.

I asked if I might see it, all the same, and the old priest brought me, in his arms, a little child, lying asleep in a cradle, with a face, as they all said, like the face of an angel. I asked them to draw up the blinds so that I might see it better, and then I realised my loss, and kissed it, and wept over it, and clasped its cold little hands.

They took it away from me very quickly, saying that I should agitate myself too much.

Later on in the same day, they asked me whether I should object to my baby being buried in the Roman Catholic cemetery at Briga, reminding me that Hugo, although he had been married at a Protestant church, had been baptised in the Roman Catholic faith. I replied that it was a peaceful and beautiful spot, and that I should like my child to be buried there.

Afterwards, when all this had come to seem like a dream, they told me that I had been very ill indeed, nigh, in fact, unto death, and that, just as I appeared to be sinking from exhaustion, a servant-girl, to whom I had done a few kindnesses, ran off in the grey of the early morning, and fetched the good old *padre* from Briga, thinking that it would be doubly unfortunate were I to die without the last consolations of religion.

By the time the *padre* arrived, however, I had fallen into a deep sleep, and it was about the baby that everyone was anxious. Miss Warden, knowing that I had feared above all things that some taint of hereditary sin or madness might be transmitted to Hugo's child, said to Lord Silchester, who had seemed to attach but little importance to religious forms, that this was the last baby in the world who should be allowed to pass away unbaptised, and that, as there was no Protestant clergyman within reach, the good old *padre* had better at once perform the sacred rite.

My godfather had been so greatly overcome by the peril I had been in that he allowed Miss Warden to do as she desired. She remembered to have heard the Prince say, when we were at Nice, that if ever he had a son he should wish him to be named after one of the Polish monarchs—the first, or the last, but she could not recollect which; and that if he had a daughter he should call her "Maria Helena," "Maria" having been the name of his

mother. Finally, however, as Lord Silchester remembered that Hugo always alluded to the last King of Poland as "a puppet of Russia," and as, in the state of trepidation in which they were, they could not call to mind the name of the first, my child was christened simply "George,"—my godfather, in his affectionate anxiety to associate himself with me and mine, having stood as his sponsor. Miss Warden was the other, two sponsors only being required in the Catholic Church, and then, just at the moment (as I like to believe) when I was dreaming about the hovering angels, my poor little boy went quietly to sleep for ever.

One evening, when I was quite recovered, and could go about as usual, Lord Silchester walked with me to the burying-ground at Briga, and showed me the little mound beneath which my baby was lying, and the pretty wooden cross which he had had set up at the head of it, with the ends all carved in transparent fretwork. He asked me what I should like to have written upon the foot-piece, and we decided after a while upon this short inscription:

"To the memory of George, the only child of Hugo and Helen," and then followed the date of both birth and death.

A good many years have passed away since then, and yet, because of the distance and the long journey, and because, too, of finding something so sad at the end of it, I have never beheld this peaceful spot since that evening, when I hung a garland of white Alpine flowers upon the wooden cross. But some day (I say to myself) I will certainly go and revisit it once more.

The sadness which comes upon me at times, when I remember that this child of mine is lying so far away, in a foreign land, is quite unmingled with any regret that he should be reposing in a Catholic churchyard.

"Heaven is a palace with many doors," poor Hugo had said to me when there had been a question as to where

we should be married, "and each one may enter it in his own way," and I have no fears but that through one of these many doors my little George has managed to creep up to the foot of the Eternal Throne.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

We had arranged—before hiding ourselves thus from the world—a system by which we were enabled to receive our letters and newspapers. Lord Silchester had left his address with his valet, in England—a trusty and discreet servant—to whom, however, he had merely stated that he was travelling in Italy, and that, as he was in deep mourning, and in need of rest, he did not wish his name to be prominently advertised in all the hotel lists. Hence his letters were to be forwarded to him simply as Mr. Collingwood. As for myself, I never expected now to receive letters. I had confided in Mrs. Marks, however—who knew so much about me already—what were to be my plans, and she had promised to keep me informed of the progress of the Prince's trial; for, although she was now re-established in Bayswater, she was in constant communication with her husband. We settled that all letters to me which came to Northover were to be forwarded under cover to Miss Warden; the same reason that had been given by Lord Silchester to his valet being put forward in explanation—that I was in need of quiet, anxious for privacy, and did not wish to have my name and address published in the newspapers. If, by all these precautions, any suspicions were aroused, we flattered ourselves that they must continue to be suspicions only,

and that the real reason for our thus secluding ourselves would not be divined. The neighbours round about Northover—some of whom had been said to share my cousin Courtenay's opinion with regard to "poor Sir Harry"—supposing that any rumours reached them of my indisposition, might possibly imagine that I had suddenly gone out of my mind; but, situated as I was, I did not care very much for what they thought.

Miss Warden had heard, through one of the old servants, that Sir Courtenay would not be able to afford to live at Northover for some years. He appeared, however, not to wish to let the place. Perhaps during these years he was going to look out for an heiress, and that, after he was married to her, he would come back and settle at the old house. Till then, however, he had left orders that "Miss Nelly" was to come and go just as she liked, and he had said that he hoped she would continue to look upon the place as her home. He might possibly visit it from time to time with a few friends in the shooting season, but to settle in England just at present would be fatal to his career, which it was not his intention to abandon yet. I should be rendering him a real service, therefore, he said, by continuing to live at Northover, keeping the house aired, and looking after the servants.

All this was very kind and condescending of him, of course, but I always experienced a peculiar sense of bitterness and impatience at any allusion to my cousin or his plans. Perhaps I was still inclined to blame him for the results of my own folly, or else I may have been animated by a feeling of jealousy at the notion that he was now the master of the house which had once been my home. Anyhow, as this is meant to be a truthful record, I am bound to confess that I had conceived a violent prejudice against my prosperous and self-complacent kinsman—as I had pictured him in my own mind. He seemed, now, to be

patronising me, and dictating terms. Even when I thought of Hugo—the cause of all my present misery and humiliation—my heart was animated by a far more friendly feeling.

Ever since the birth and death of my child, indeed, my sentiments respecting the murder of Dr. Bernard had undergone a decided change. The deed itself I regarded with no less horror; but looking back to the time of my union with Hugo—to his kindness to myself, as well as to everything that was weak and defenceless—to the self-control and the amiability which he was wont on all occasions to display—I came to the conclusion that if he had ever committed the hideous crime with which he was charged, his act must have been purely mechanical—the result of some irresistible impelling force, for which he was not morally responsible—but that it was impossible to believe that he could be possessed of either the heart or the mind of a murderer.

I had imagined, certainly, that I had surprised a wild look sometimes in his eyes, but I said to myself, now, that this was the wildness not of a natural ferocity but of acquired mental affliction—the result of his too far-reaching researches. It was not intended that man should be anything but a finite creature. There were closed doors at which it was not prudent for him even to knock. But Hugo, in his insatiable craving after occult knowledge, had striven to force open some of these, and madness was the penalty he had had to pay for his temerity!

The Russian authorities, it seems, eventually took this view of the Prince's case. As soon as I was supposed to be strong enough to bear the news, Lord Silchester informed me of the result of the preliminary inquiry, which had been conducted almost privately. It had been decided that there could be no doubt as to his having committed the fatal deed; but the trial was deferred in order that information might be collected with regard to

the state of the Prince's mind, his counsel having started the plea of insanity when he found that the evidence was so damaging to his client.

The result of this inquiry had been that Prince Crecszoleski was pronounced of unsound mind—unfit to manage his own affairs, and irresponsible for his actions. The Princess, his mother, had been confined in a lunatic asylum for some years previous to her son's birth, having displayed signs of suicidal mania whilst her first child was quite an infant. Her two children, who were placed under the care of governesses and tutors, had never been informed of this circumstance, which was, no doubt, the means of saving Hugo now from the bitter humiliation of a criminal sentence. He was simply *to disappear*, as Mrs. Marks had foreseen, being declared mad, and ordered to be placed in proper restraint. When this intelligence reached us he was about to be removed to a private lunatic asylum, which was kept by a celebrated German physician, Dr. Schumann by name, a few miles distant from St. Petersburg. The administration of his estates was to be vested in the hands of trustees. From these estates a princely revenue had at one time been derived, for, besides the timber they produced, and which was easily and cheaply conveyed by means of the river Vistula, to the ports of the Baltic, there were mines of salt and copper, and quarries of marble upon parts of the property. Of late years, however—the Prince being such a determined absentee—the management of the extensive forests, as well as the working of the different mines, had been much neglected. It transpired, also, that the debts of the Prince amounted to a considerable sum. It had been proposed, therefore, to subdivide the yearly income that should accrue to him—once the property had been placed under proper management—into three parts. One for the Prince's own maintenance whilst in the asylum, in a style becoming to his rank and position; another to

accumulate for the advantage of his heirs; and a third portion to be set aside annually for the improvement of the estate.

In the course of the inquiry the fact that the Prince had been privately married was brought to the knowledge of his legal advisers. No further allusion had been made to it, however, neither had my maiden name been publicly mentioned. Had my poor little boy have lived, it would not have been possible, Lord Silchester assured me, for the matter to have rested here. I must have come forward, then, as the Prince's lawful wife, and asserted the rights of his son. Even now, my godfather thought that it would be expedient for me to have legal advice as to whether I ought not to put forward a claim for some portion of the revenue of the estate; for he said that however much my situation might be deserving of pity in the eyes of the world, there could be neither shame nor disgrace in the fact that I had unfortunately married a man who had since been placed under medical *surveillance.*

I reflected upon this matter for a whole day, and came to the conclusion that I could gain nothing by making the public acquainted with my misfortunes, except, perhaps, an additional income, to which certain conditions and restrictions might be attached—an enforced residence in Russia, for instance, for some part of each year—which would seriously interfere with my liberty of action. I decided, therefore, that, at any rate for the present, I would prefer not to divulge my secret. My child, for whose sake I must have come forward from my obscurity, was dead and buried, and I would far rather (I declared) be looked upon, for the rest of my days, simply as "Helen Davenant," a common-place old maid, than parade as a Polish Princess with so tragic a past.

Now that Sir Harry's affairs had been disposed of, I found myself exceedingly well off. My father, indeed, had left me nothing beyond what had been secured to me

by his marriage settlement; not even the diamonds which my mother had worn, and which were left to my cousin Courtenay, for the use of his future wife. Sixty thousand pounds, however, had been set aside at the time of my father's marriage with my mother, for the benefit of their younger children; and, as I happened to be the sole offspring of the union, this sum of money had accrued to me now, together with the small estate of Croft's Farm, which adjoined Northover Park, and upon which, in a pretty old manor-house, my mother had resided—previous to her marriage—with her father, a retired major-general. At this time she had no prospect of being the small heiress she eventually became; for my uncle Everard, a gallant young artilleryman, was then alive. He was killed, however, only a few years afterwards, in the Crimea; and, upon the death of the old General, the fortune which would have been his passed to my mother, who thus became entitled to about two thousand a year. This income descended to me as soon as I attained my majority; so that, with the sixty thousand previously settled, I felt that I possessed enough and to spare without coveting any portion of the revenues of the Crecszoleski estates. I asked my godfather whether he thought that Madame Dobrowolska would ever put forward her claim as her brother's heir, when, by so doing, she might run the risk of being tried for murder or confined in a madhouse; for, of course, the plea of insanity would be available, also, in her case? He replied, that he hoped, for her own sake, that she would keep out of the way; but that she was a very peculiar person, capable of doing the most rash and unexpected things, and seeming even to take pleasure in everything that was associated with danger. Had she been a younger woman—likely to marry again and have children — some of these might bring forward their claims in the future. There was not much chance, however, he thought, of any such contingency now. I felt, I

knew not wherefore, that the name of this terrible woman possessed a kind of unaccountable fascination for me. I should have shrunk from any sort of contact with her as I should have shrunk from contact with a poisonous serpent. And yet, now that she was powerless, as I thought, to harm me, I felt a desire to talk about her—to learn what she was like in the face—and to know more of her personal history; just as I might have been tempted to examine one of those same poisonous serpents through the panes of its glass prison at the Zoological Gardens.

"What is she like?" I asked, curious to learn every peculiarity of feature and expression.

But, to Lord Silchester, the subject did not appear to be equally fascinating.

"She was a beautiful woman once," he answered, an expression of pain—akin to that which poor Hugo had so often displayed at mention of this name—clouding his brow for a moment: "tall, with a fine figure, and extraordinary hair. But she has led a strange, wandering, somewhat disreputable existence. She is probably much changed since I saw her last."

I asked him whether she at all resembled Hugo in face or manner.

He replied, that he could never perceive much resemblance between them himself, but that he was not a good hand at seeing likenesses. There was a similarity about their colouring, and they were both tall. Madame Dobrowolska, however, had the handsomer features.

"She was fair, then?" I asked, thinking of the fair-haired woman of Mr. Marks's vision.

"Yes; she had very fair hair," he answered, "like her brother—with very dark eye-lashes and eye-brows, and no colour in her face—a fairness altogether unlike the fairness of an Englishwoman."

"But why should we talk upon such painful subjects?" he exclaimed suddenly, as though resenting the effect of

some unpleasant memory; "if you are to gain no advantages of any kind by your unfortunate marriage, it would be surely better to endeavour to forget that you were ever allied to this unhappy family at all. There is something else that I want to talk over with you—a plan for the future."

I, too, had a plan in my mind, but I knew not how to bring it about, how to allude to it, even, without appearing to be inconsistent.

"Let me tell you of something first," I said, "before you speak of any plan which is sure to seem pleasanter than mine. If I don't declare my marriage it isn't because I want to shirk any of its duties, any of the pain that I have brought upon myself. Hugo is still my husband. I ought to go where I could see him from time to time, to be within reach of the place where he is, in case he might be ill or in want of me. There is some strange mystery about this story of the murder, something mesmeric, which we are unable to understand, and it must be so dreadful for him to be cut off from all the world! But how can I go all the way to St. Petersburg by myself, and who could I find who would go with me so far?"

I noticed that my godfather's face brightened as I was speaking.

"My dearest Helen," he exclaimed, "that your kind heart should have prompted you to wish this is fortunate indeed for me! For some years I have had an ambition, as all men of my age ought to have, an ambition, in my case, connected with my diplomatic career. Two days ago I heard that this might be about to be realised, but, like so many hoped-for things, it seemed to have come too late, although, during my father's lifetime, I could hardly have accepted a post which would have taken me so far away from home, even had it been offered to me. Having been with you, however, in your danger and suffering, you know not, my child, how dear you have become to me.

I have tasted the delightful intimacy and repose of home life, which, in spite of my years, was entirely new to me. I felt, dear Helen, that I could not have abandoned you now, in your helpless and unprotected state. In a word, with some regret, as I cannot help admitting, I had just made up my mind to refuse what I had been looking to as the culmination of my professional hopes, and to vegetate quietly at home, where you could have been near me, at Croft's Farm, and I could have seen you often. But now, all this is changed. I will take you to St. Petersburg to see your husband, and to consult with the lawyers upon your case. I hear that I am to be offered the post of Ambassador there, and you and Miss Warden must come and keep house for me at the Embassy."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

It will be easy enough for the reader to discover that no such person as Lord Silchester was ever accredited Her Majesty's Ambassador at St. Petersburg. It has been the privilege of romance-writers, however, from the earliest times, to exalt and degrade their personages, as it has seemed good unto them. History, itself, indeed, plays pranks of the same kind. Was Guy, the vanquisher of the Danish giant, really Earl of Warwick? They tell us, now, that the story is a corruption of one of the old Scandinavian legends, having to do with the adventures of the god Thor. What right had Robin Hood to the earldom of Huntingdon? Not much, I am afraid! And yet one does not read with less interest of his daring exploits, of Maid Marian, and his "merry men," clad in their Lincoln green, and of the jovial, lawless life beneath the greenwood tree, for all that; or even because some

wiseacres have discovered that the bold outlaw, as he has descended to us, never existed at all, being, like William Tell, of glorious memory, merely an incarnation of the archer of the zodiac, who marked one of the halting-places of the solar divinity upon his journey along the ecliptic!

This story, then, is simply a romance, the characters mythical, the events untrue?

I would like my readers to believe that it is false, as is all true history—true, as is all fabled myth! That it is a blending together, that is, of fact and fiction, and that, to serve the purposes of the latter, Lord Silchester is now established upon the banks of the Neva as English Ambassador.

We were at the Embassy, too, Miss Warden and myself. We had a sitting-room to ourselves, and, during the first few weeks after our arrival, saw very little of the *personnel* of the Embassy—leading a life which was almost entirely secluded.

I had changed, or rather curtailed, my name. I think I have already mentioned that, Lord Silchester having been my godfather, I had been christened "Helen Collingwood." As the name of "Davenant" was no longer mine, and as I still shrank from assuming that of "Crecszoleski," we came to the conclusion that it would be better, pending a more satisfactory arrangement of my affairs, to drop my surname altogether, and to call myself simply "Miss Hélen Collingwood," which, without being in any sense a false name, would serve the double purpose of shrouding my identity, and of seeming to associate me with the family of the Ambassador.

My godfather, in spite of his important diplomatic duties, was continually busying himself in my behalf. His first step was to collect information with respect both to the law of divorce in Russia, as applied to mixed marriages, and also as to how far our union in a

Protestant church (Hugo being at the time a Roman Catholic) might have affected the legality of the marriage.

I had not seen my unfortunate husband as yet. I think Lord Silchester dreaded, for both of us, the pain of this interview. He begged me to defer it, at any rate, until he had obtained all the information he sought, lest I might be influenced, upon beholding his melancholy situation, to act in opposition to my own interests. He had seen the doctor who had charge of the Prince, and had confided to him the true state of affairs. I could have news of Hugo, therefore, whenever I liked, and, in the course of little more than half-an-hour, if need be, I could drive to the doctor's villa. The Ambassador proposed visiting the Prince, first himself, as the bearer of a letter from me, in which I should express my intention of coming to St. Petersburg, and I was to be guided in my future conduct by the manner in which this information was received. At the time of which I am writing, towards the middle of the month of January, the Ambassador had not yet paid Hugo this proposed visit, nor had I been able to find words in which to write the letter in question.

It was evident that my godfather hardly knew what to advise for the best. He dreaded, under the present painful circumstances, any kind of *rapprochement* between Hugo and myself, which could only have the effect of making our second parting the more harrowing; and yet I could see that he was not altogether in favour of a divorce. Miss Warden was of opinion that he was so attached to me himself, although—as she now admitted—only after a platonic or parental fashion, that he preferred my remaining in my present equivocal position, when he could constitute himself my chief protector, to running the risk of losing me through any change in my circumstances.

One other person in St. Petersburg, besides the doctor

of the private lunatic asylum, was in our confidence—the Emperor Alexander himself.

"Everything must be brought to the knowledge of the Czar," Lord Silchester had said to me soon after our arrival in St. Petersburg; "once we have obtained His Imperial Majesty's approval of our conduct, nobody else will have a right to find fault with it. One of the advantages of living under a despotism is, that we are permitted to fly to the autocrat in any social difficulty, and appeal to him as the arbiter of our fate!"

My sad case had been brought, almost immediately afterwards, to His Imperial Majesty's notice, to whom my reasons for wishing to maintain a strict incognito had also been explained. The Ambassador represented me as his god-child, the daughter of very old and intimate friends in England, who were both of them dead. He stated that I was in mourning, now, for my father, and that this, and the melancholy condition of the Prince, my husband, would debar me from going much into society during the time of my stay in the Russian capital. These communications, it seems, had been very graciously received, and, for a time, everything appeared to go on satisfactorily. I must mention here, however, that we had been somewhat embarrassed, upon our arrival, at finding that Mr. Montagu-Morrison, of whom Lord Silchester had spoken as one of the greatest gossips in the diplomatic service, had arrived before us at the British Embassy. My godfather, knowing of his appointment, was prepared for this, and could only hope that he would not recognise us as the heroines of the adventure with the snake, or that if he did so, he would not, at any rate, know anything about the painful reason of our sojourn at St. Dalmas de Tende.

As we made no allusion to any previous meeting, but behaved, when presented to him, as though we had never beheld him before, and as he made no reference to it

himself, it was impossible to divine how much he might have known or suspected. We became filled with mistrust of him, however, in consequence of this uncertainty, fancying sometimes, from his manner, that he wished to show us that we were in some sense at his mercy; and as he was a man towards whom we should not have been attracted in any circumstances, we had ended by taking quite a dislike to him.

Lord Silchester, as I have already said, spoke of me as his god-daughter, but somehow it came to be assumed, by the members of the *corps diplomatique*, that I was his niece. I was also described, by way of variation, as his "ward." To these erroneous assumptions I could not object, as the more intimately I was associated with the Ambassador in the minds of the people by whom we were surrounded, the more natural and proper would they consider it that I should reside beneath his roof.

Mr. Morrison alone, or so we fancied, appeared to be doubtful as to my relationship to His Excellency, the statements as to which, without denying, we had never in any way confirmed.

From the first day of our arrival, he appeared determined to thrust his company upon us, whether we desired it or not, and he was perpetually questioning us and making allusions which, in our ignorance of the extent of his knowledge, we felt to be exceedingly embarrassing. Lord Silchester thought that it was merely an insatiable curiosity which led him to pry into the affairs of his neighbours, whilst vanity induced him to pretend to know more than he really did, and, whilst assuring us that he did not believe there was really much harm in him, he advised us, on account of these annoying characteristics, to keep him somewhat at a distance. We acted upon this advice accordingly. The gossiping little *attaché* strove to conceal his resentment at our behaviour, but we

could not help fearing that we had turned him into a secret foe.

At about the time of which I am writing, that is, after we had been for some three weeks in St. Petersburg, Lord Silchester came to the conclusion, in consequence of some unpleasant whispers, which had reached his ears relating to my position at the Embassy, that these were due a good deal to the retirement and mystery in which I was shrouded, and that it would be better for me to come forward openly, as his god-daughter, and to be presented as such to some of his new acquaintances.

He persuaded me to appear, therefore, at two formal dinner-parties which were given at the Embassy, at each of which I occupied a seat at the head of the table, to which I was escorted by the guest of the highest rank.

After this, I was generally included in the invitations received by the Ambassador. I made it a rule, however, to decline all such civilities, pleading as an excuse my deep mourning and delicate health.

But now a grand entertainment, a fancy ball, was to be given, in the course of the ensuing month, at the British Embassy, and I was anxiously debating as to whether I should have to appear at it or not. Lord Silchester was greatly in favour of my doing so, whilst *I*, on the contrary, was as much opposed to the idea. If I had had only my own inclinations to follow, I should have desired to pay my proposed visit to Hugo, to help my godfather with his decorations and invitations for the ball, and then, with my faithful companion, Miss Warden, to have departed for England before the entertainment in question took place. But then I had other people's feelings to consider besides my own.

To the Ambassador, for instance, my departure at such a moment would be, as I could not fail to perceive, a real disappointment. Miss Warden, too, who had never witnessed an entertainment upon so magnificent a scale, was

most anxious that I should remain for it. Lord Silchester's visit to my husband was, from one cause or another, deferred from day to day. The letter preparing him for my coming had never been written, for I found it almost impossible to decide how I ought to express myself; and last, but not least, with every desire to quit St. Petersburg immediately after this proposed visit, I dreaded the idea of returning to England with only Miss Warden and Mason for escort. Could I not find some one who might be going home in the course of the next fortnight, and who would consent to look after three "unprotected females" upon the journey? These were the questions that were occupying my mind at this time, when I resume the thread of my narrative upon the banks of the Neva.

One afternoon, when Miss Warden and I were in our sitting-room, discussing these matters, we were interrupted by a knock at the door, and a visitor was announced—Mr. Montagu-Morrison; could he speak to us for a few minutes?

Having no excuse ready, he was admitted forthwith.

After taking off his fur coat in the ante-room, he shook hands with us, and then drew up a chair to the stove.

"I hope I'm not trespassing upon your time," he said apologetically, "but the Turkish Ambassador is with His Excellency, and I did not like to disturb him, and there's a little Italian *attaché* worrying my life out about this forthcoming festivity, wishing to know exactly when it's going to be. I thought you might be able to give me some idea, as these things are generally known to ladies a good while beforehand?"

"You mean the fancy ball?" I asked. "Oh, I don't suppose it will take place for some time! It depends on so many other things. Nothing is settled as yet."

"That's just what I said. I said that nothing was settled, and that I would let him know when it was. It

seems that a lady, a friend of his, or the friend of a lady friend—a "Contessa" something—is very anxious to time her arrival in Petersburg so as to come in for this event, and wants to have plenty of warning beforehand, so that she may think about her costume, I suppose, and invent something that will take us northern barbarians by storm!"

We promised Mr. Morrison that we would let him know as soon as the date of the ball was decided upon.

"I know that Miss Collingwood is entirely in His Excellency's confidence," he said, turning to Miss Warden; "she will be sure to know the moment that the day is settled."

His remark, in any other circumstances, would probably have seemed perfectly natural. But now I fancied that I detected a ring of sarcasm in his words, and I felt that I was blushing painfully.

"I'll be bound that you two ladies, although you pretend to know so little, have made up your minds long ago as to what you are going to wear?" Mr. Morrison went on by-and-by.

"I mean to go as a *duenna*," replied Miss Warden, "if I go at all! I shall wear a dear little thing on my head like a black velvet muffin, with a kind of shaving brush at the top of it, and a long veil. It will be very becoming, I think, and need not be at all expensive."

"And you, Miss Collingwood," asked our visitor, "shall you be very magnificent? Are you going as Cleopatra, or Mary Queen of Scots, or Madame de Pompadour?"

"Why 'Madame de Pompadour'?" I inquired quickly; but, as soon as the words had escaped me, I wished that I had not spoken, and I felt myself changing colour again.

"Oh, only because the dress is so pretty!" he answered, carelessly; "rouge and powder, and patches, and all

that! Not that you've any need of such artificial aids to beauty!"

"I'm not sure," I said, "that I shall be able to go to the ball at all. I may be obliged to leave Petersburg before it takes place. I haven't thought yet about my dress. As you see, I'm in mourning."

"Oh, but you must go to the ball!" he exclaimed, as we fancied, with assumed concern. "One sets aside one's private feelings upon such official occasions! Why, His Excellency himself is in mourning."

"Yes," I answered, absently; "he is in mourning for his father."

"The old Lord Silchester. I remember seeing him years ago in Paris, when his son used to be there. A fine-looking old man. Your grandfather, I presume?"

"My *grandfather?*" I repeated, bewildered. Then, recovering myself, I added quickly, "He was not related to me in any way; nor is this Lord Silchester; he is merely a friend."

"Oh, I fancied that he was your uncle!" remarked Mr. Morrison, with rather a curious look. "All Petersburg gives you the credit of being very intimately connected with him!"

"All Petersburg is wrong then," I answered, speaking as quietly as I could, but with cheeks that I felt were becoming crimson; "but he is my godfather, and a very dear friend."

Miss Warden came to my rescue, observing my confusion, and inquired of Mr. Montagu-Morrison what he intended to wear himself at the fancy ball?

"I haven't quite made up my mind as yet," he answered; "but I think that at a fancy ball in a foreign land the Briton ought always to assume some essentially English *rôle*, with the view of striking terror into the heart of the foreigner. Perhaps I may go as St. George; but it might be difficult to provide oneself with a dragon

—and there ought to be a dragon you know, the part would be nothing without one! Perhaps, however, a big snake would do as well. Something for one to destroy, you know, and trample in the dust with one's heel. I'm rather a good hand at killing snakes!"

"I wish that we could discover how much he really knows!" Miss Warden exclaimed, as soon as our tormentor had departed. "I wonder whether he recognises us as the people he met when he killed that horrid snake, and whether he and his friends stayed on at St. Dalmas during that terrible night?"

"I don't know," I answered; "perhaps we do him an injustice; but I certainly fancy that he wishes to sneer at us and taunt us, and that all the people here at the Embassy seem to look upon us in an evil light. It is time that we should think about returning to England."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A CIRCUMSTANCE which tended to strengthen me in this impression was my recollection of the strange behaviour just before this of Captain Dangerfield, the English military *attaché*.

Without describing individually the *personnel* of the Embassy it will be necessary for me to say a few words about this distinguished officer. He was, I should think, about three or four and thirty, a married man, in the horse artillery, who was looked upon, it seems, as one of the handsomest men in the British army. When the ladies of St. Petersburg had at first heard this, and that he was so shortly to be introduced into their midst, they

all began (to use Mr. Morrison's expression) "to sit up and smooth their tuckers."

But a great disappointment was in store for them. The Captain had arrived, accompanied by his wife, a little, dowdy, insignificant looking woman (to quote again the words of our gossiping informant), who ruled him nevertheless with a rod of iron, and to add to their discomfiture (according to the same authority) "Providence when turning out such a highly decorative object" had endowed him with certain neutralising characteristics, with the view of setting him upon the same level as ordinary mortals.

He had been "cursed" (Mr. Morrison told us) "with middle-class prudery, deadly dulness, and an exaggerated notion of the sanctity of the marriage tie;" so that when Mrs. Dangerfield (whose dress and appearance Mr. Morrison was never tired of turning into ridicule) was obliged to leave St. Petersburg, being unable to endure the climate, the Russian syrens found that their chances had not improved, although they had endeavoured by every means to lay siege to the Captain's heart. They were stimulated in their evil designs partly by a feeling of revenge; for Mrs. Dangerfield, having succeeded in retaining the affections of this large, loyal-hearted man, had held her head naturally somewhat high, and so had rendered herself extremely unpopular.

It was not possible, however, to lure the Captain from the path of duty. He wrote to his wife regularly every day, and was continually sending her home little tokens of his affection in the shape of furs, old silver ornaments, and caviare, by the messenger.

When he found himself alone with any of his female admirers, he talked to them persistently about his wife, or repeated for their benefit the witty sallies of his youngest child. This loyalty upon the Captain's part had exasperated them terribly. They christened him

"*l'Anglais impossible*," "*le Bayard bourgeois*," "*le Danger échappé*" (a kind of play upon his name), and had now given him up as utterly hopeless and ridiculous.

All this, which had been told me, no doubt, with the object of rendering Captain Dangerfield contemptible in my eyes, had had the effect of prepossessing me in his favour. I perceived that he was what might be called rather a dull man, and that his dulness was even increased by his being well-informed, for occasions appropriate to solid and improving conversation did not often occur in the society in which he now moved, and as he was possessed of neither humour nor imagination he did not shine in small talk or repartee. It was impossible to look at his magnificent *physique* without admiration, but in spite of his height, his strength, his well-shaped head and classic features, he was neither sympathetic nor attractive. The fact of his being such a pre-eminently "good-creature," too, seemed somehow to render him, to my mind, at least, a little commonplace.

Still, because he happened to be a man with whom I should have found it quite impossible to fall in love, there was no reason why I should not secure him as a friend. He was the very man, indeed, whose friendship I was anxious to cultivate and for this reason:—

Mrs. Dangerfield—"the little woman," as her husband always called her—had written to say that he must return to England as soon as possible, as she could not exist without him; and, obedient to her commands, he had resigned his post, and was only remaining on at St. Petersburg for the convenience of the Ambassador. As soon as he could be spared, he would depart at once.

Now that my position at the Embassy appeared to me to have become somewhat embarrassing and difficult of explanation, it occurred to me that if I could only become upon sufficiently friendly terms with Captain Dangerfield, this gallant officer—a married man, devoted to his wife,

chivalrous and honourable—would be the very person to escort us back to England, and that my godfather could raise no objection to our travelling under the charge of so exemplary a man. I had said nothing, as yet, to Lord Silchester upon this subject, not wishing to worry him with my plans until I had arranged them in some definite form. I hoped, however, that events would shape themselves in accordance with my desires, and that I should be enabled thus to leave St. Petersburg before the proposed fancy ball.

I scarcely knew why I looked forward to this entertainment with so much apprehension. It was not alone because I might have to assist in doing the honours of it to so many distinguished guests. This idea did not alarm me as much as might have been expected, considering my inexperience in such matters. I disliked the notion of appearing at a ball at all, of course, after all the misery I had gone through; and as I had met Hugo for the first time at a ball, I felt certain that I should be painfully reminded, by the music and dancing, of the beginning of all my misfortunes. But I was quite prepared for the fact that, unless I made a public avowal of my painful situation, I should have now occasionally to mingle in society, however distasteful this might be to me. There must be some other reason, therefore (I said to myself), which caused me thus to shudder involuntarily at the thought of this approaching entertainment at the British Embassy.

As I have already said, it had been agreed that Lord Silchester should visit Hugo, in the first instance, without me. It seemed a long time before the opportunity for doing this presented itself;—so long that I fancied the Ambassador must be purposely delaying from day to day what he knew could not fail to be painful, for I had become aware, by this time, how much he shrank from all that was disagreeable and disturbing.

At last, however, when we had been nearly a month in St. Petersburg, the visit took place. Upon Lord Silchester's return from it he sent for me to his private apartments. I could see at once that he had been deeply moved.

"Are you still resolved to go and see your unhappy husband?" he inquired, after pressing my hand affectionately. I replied that I had come to Russia only with this object, as he well knew, and that after I had seen Hugo, and made him understand that, as long as I lived, I could never believe him to be morally guilty of the crime imputed to him, my mission would be ended, and I should desire to return to England as soon as possible. His brow clouded at this allusion to my return.

"We shall have time to talk about that," he remarked, "after you have seen Hugo, and after this ball, at which I shall greatly require your assistance. The Emperor, and other members of the Imperial family, are to be my guests. I am only waiting to fix the day until they have selected the evening upon which they can be present. If, as you seem to imagine, there are any malicious stories afloat respecting you, it is of the highest importance that the ill-natured people who have invented them should be put to confusion, and this end will be attained if you appear at this ball, and help me to receive my guests. As to poor Hugo, will next Thursday suit you to go with me to see him?" It was now Tuesday. I told him that Thursday would suit me perfectly, and accordingly, upon the afternoon of that day, I set out with the Ambassador, bound for Dr. Schumann's villa.

I felt very nervous and agitated upon my arrival, being quite unable to foresee what effect this interview would produce upon me. Lord Silchester had told me that Hugo seemed but little changed mentally—that he, himself, had always looked upon him as mad, but that he regarded him as no more mad now than he had been when I had seen him for the first time. I should observe

a great difference in his appearance, because he now wore a beard, it having been thought imprudent to trust him with a razor, and he had also adopted a peculiar costume, the dress of the followers of some sect who professed to have done for ever with the world. But for this, my godfather said, I should find him the same as before. Nevertheless, I could not help trembling violently when the door of the room opened quietly. It was only the doctor, a courteous, intelligent-looking man, who had been duly informed beforehand of our coming. He was the means of affording me what I could not but regard as a reprieve from some kind of impending torture. The Prince, he said, had appeared much depressed since the visit of His Excellency. He had abandoned the reading and writing from which he had hitherto seemed to derive a melancholy pleasure, and had sat moodily silent with his hands pressed to his forehead. Dr. Schumann said that he could not answer for the effect which this interview might produce upon him. Had I been a mere casual acquaintance, it would have been a different matter. In a word, we were compelled by the doctor's advice to abandon our intention, and postpone our visit to some future day.

During our homeward drive, I remained silent, wrapped in my own thoughts. By the time that we arrived at the Embassy I had come to the conclusion that I must now remain on in the Russian capital, at any rate until Hugo was allowed to see me, having travelled so far with this object. I hoped with all my heart that I might still depart before the fancy ball, which would have the effect, supposing that I assisted at it, of bringing me so prominently forward. I would inquire of Captain Dangerfield, at once, when he proposed returning home, and beg him to allow us to travel back in his company, and then make the departure of the Captain an excuse for hurrying on our own.

We fell in with Captain Dangerfield upon the following

Sunday as we came out of the English church, at which he was a very regular attendant, and I quickened my pace in order that I might walk with him along the English quay, a little in advance of the rest of our party.

I began by asking him what he meant to wear at the forthcoming ball, saying that I thought—as I really did—that he would look well as a Crusader. He replied, twirling his long fair moustaches rather conceitedly, that a great many people had made the same remark, but that, even supposing that he remained on for the ball, he should not dream of going to the expense of a fancy dress—the "Queen's uniform" being quite good enough for him. As it was, however, he hoped to get off before it took place. I informed him that *I*, too, proposed returning to England very shortly, that I dreaded making the journey with only Miss Warden and my maid, and I then asked him whether he would be kind enough, supposing the time happened to fit in conveniently, to allow us to place ourselves under his care?

He seemed to be much surprised to hear of my intended departure, but said that he should be proud and pleased to escort us home, that he was a capital hand at looking after ladies, having "gone through his training," and that he felt certain "Mrs. D." would give him an excellent character in this respect. He would let me know, at once, as soon as the day of his departure was fixed; all he knew, at present, was that he "meant to be off before the ball." I begged that he would say nothing, as yet, to the Ambassador upon the subject of my request, as I wished to be the first to speak to him about it. He promised that he would do as I wished, and our conversation ended, as I thought, very satisfactorily.

Some days afterwards, as I was returning from a drive, I met Captain Dangerfield coming out of the room where Lord Silchester habitually transacted his official business. He bowed, in rather a distant manner, as I fancied, and

passed me hurriedly. I was a little surprised that he should not have stopped and made some allusion to his journey home. After that I had neither seen nor heard from him again, but, upon the evening preceding the day of which I am writing, I learnt, quite accidentally, that he was starting immediately for England. It would have been quite impossible for us to get ready now in time to accompany him. I was quite at a loss to imagine what could have prevented him from informing us of the day of his departure!

But now, upon this particular day, immediately after Mr. Montagu-Morrison had left us, I fancied that I perceived Captain Dangerfield's motive. He had been prejudiced against me, probably, by the mischief-making little man who had just paid us a visit, and who, wishing to be supposed to know everything about everybody, had, no doubt, confided to the military *attaché* his suspicions regarding me. Captain Dangerfield, a respectable married man, did not wish to travel back to England in company with an adventuress. He was afraid of what "the little woman" might say, who "ruled him with a rod of iron," and so he had formed the project of escaping by flight from my importunities! I felt indignant, outraged, humiliated; I was upon the point of rushing at once into the presence of the Ambassador in order to entreat him to publish abroad the particulars of my marriage without any further delay.

Whilst I was in this uncomfortable frame of mind, Mr. Montagu-Morrison sent in his card for the second time. He had scribbled the following words upon it in pencil: "My persecutor wishes to know whether ball is to be *masqué et costumé?* Forgot to ask about the *masqué*."

Mr. Morrison was waiting in the vestibule which opened from our sitting-room, his messenger said. In spite of my growing mistrust I went out to speak to him there so as to save the trouble of writing.

"Ten thousand pardons, my dear Miss Collingwood!" he said; "but it seems that I stupidly left out the most important part of my message."

I told him that, as far as I knew at present, dominos would be permissible, but that I had heard His Excellency say that he hoped they would be the exception rather than the rule, as otherwise the effect of the ball would be spoilt; besides which, "masks" were apt sometimes to assume a freedom of speech and manner which might not be altogether becoming in the presence of the Royal and Imperial guests who were expected.

"Quite so!" he answered, somewhat sarcastically, as I fancied. "Above all things, let us observe *les convenances!* I must ask you to pardon me for troubling you again, but His Excellency has gone to his room, and has left orders that he does not wish to be disturbed."

But just then, as ill-luck would have it, one of the Ambassador's English footmen presented himself at the door which communicated with the outer passage.

"If you please, miss," he said, "His Excellency would be much obliged to you if you would be kind enough to go to him at once in his sitting-room."

Because of what I imagined that my visitor might think, I was conscious that I blushed provokingly. After bowing to him, however, with what I intended for a look of defiance, I followed the servant at once.

I found Lord Silchester in a small room which he had fitted up as a study.

"Look here, Helen," he began, as soon as the servant had closed the door upon us. "What in the world am I to do? Advise me with your woman's wit, for Heaven's sake. Dangerfield, as you may have heard, started off for England this morning . . ."

"Started for England this morning!" I repeated, wounded at the Captain's faithlessness. "Has Captain Dangerfield really started already?"

"Yes, dear, he is gone," answered Lord Silchester, looking a little surprised at my vehemence; "but why his departure should affect you I am at a loss to imagine! Dangerfield was a most excellent, worthy creature, and clever too, after a fashion, but he didn't get on with foreigners. He's much more suited to the drudgery of the War Office, and I hope he may succeed in getting something there equal to his deserts. It's not of him, however, that I have to speak; but this letter has just come from Tom Collingwood, my Guardsman nephew, to say that his great friend, Courtenay Davenant, has applied to the F. O. for Dangerfield's place, and begging me to back his application! What am I to do in this dilemma? I think very highly of him; he is the very man, of all others, for the place, and I've always promised, whenever it was in my power, to give him a helping hand. Under ordinary circumstances I should telegraph to him to come out here at once!"

"And *now*," I asked—my heart, I knew not wherefore, giving a little bound—"what do you propose to do?"

"I fancied that his coming here would annoy you—that you might feel compelled to announce your marriage before you would otherwise have done so; you have generally spoken of him with so much dislike."

"How could his coming here now possibly influence my plans?" I asked, experiencing a sudden sensation of interest and excitement. I felt a desire to behold, from the vantage-ground afforded me by my incognito, the man I had for so long persisted in regarding as an adversary.

"Pray do not prevent him from coming!" I exclaimed; "and pray go on calling me 'Miss Collingwood' whilst he is here. If he knew who I was, I should feel shy and miserable in his presence, because, as you know, there was once some question of our marriage; but as 'Miss Collingwood,' your 'ward,' it would interest me to see

him and talk to him, and find out what he was like. He might sometimes speak to me about his cousin Nelly!"

"Might not this be a little dangerous, dear?" said the Ambassador, looking grave.

"In what way 'dangerous'?" I asked, fired now with something akin to my old spirit of adventure. "Courtenay has never seen me since I was quite a little girl in a white frock and coral necklace! He was only an Eton boy at the time; he would never recognise me again!"

I remembered my white frock and coral necklace quite well, and could recall the black kid gloves which my cousin had worn, and the mark they had made upon his nose.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking about that!" His Excellency answered. "There could be no danger in a recognition, as matters could soon be satisfactorily explained. I was thinking of another kind of danger altogether! You are a beautiful woman, tied to an unfortunate semi-lunatic. Courtenay Davenant is a very attractive man. I was thinking that, thrown together as you probably will be, once he is established here, there would be some danger of this contact ending as it usually does end, in such cases, and that you might get to care for one another."

"To 'care for one another'!" I repeated, scornfully. "Courtenay Davenant and I! How little you know what I feel about that man! Married or single, he is the very last person in the world that I should ever be likely to fall in love with!"

The Ambassador heard my vehement words with an expression such as the experienced are wont to assume whilst rash young people are making their headlong intemperate asseverations.

And then, for very scorn at the bare absurdity of the notion which had been suggested, I laughed aloud!

I wonder what manner of high power it is—whether

benevolent or malignant—that, listening to such rash laughter, seems so often to arrange that it shall, some day, be turned to weeping and gnashing of teeth?

CHAPTER XXXVI.

My cousin Courtenay arrived at St. Petersburg a little more than a week before the fancy ball, in response to a telegram which had been sent to him by the Ambassador. There was a dinner-party at the British Embassy on the same night, and he was introduced to me by Lord Silchester whilst the guests were assembling.

"I must present you to Miss Collingwood, my god-daughter and ward," he said, wearing an expression rather as though he were playing a practical joke upon the new military *attaché*, "a young lady who has been good enough to come out here and keep house for a forlorn old bachelor."

I looked at Courtenay with the greatest interest, pleased to think that he could not know who I was; and endeavoured to analyse my first impressions of him apart from any pre-conceived notions.

His face, as Miss Warden had said, was "charming," rather than regularly handsome. Its expression was variable, and the eyes were full of fire and intelligence. He had the effect of being dark, but his hair was not quite black, and his eyes were blue. His figure was tall and soldier-like, and his voice earnest and sympathetic. He was greeted by the French Ambassador, and two or three other guests, as an old friend. They addressed him as "*mon cher*," and expressed great pleasure at meeting him again. He appeared to respond to their

welcome in a very hearty and cordial manner. It was evident that, unlike his predecessor, he got on well with foreigners. I know not how it happened that, as soon as I had looked in Courtenay Davenant's face, I felt for certain that he would one day care for me. It was not vanity that prompted this thought, for, with this consciousness of what must now, inevitably, come to pass, I possessed also the conviction that, had circumstances been other than they were, it would have been utterly impossible, probably, to bring about any such result. In a word, Courtenay would come to love me now simply because all such love must be, of necessity, hopeless, and barren of fruition. I said to myself that I would in no way strive either for, or against, what I felt to be so certainly impending; that I would be perfectly passive, and drift, like a straw, upon the stream of destiny. Nevertheless, I experienced a momentary sense of triumph, for the notion that my cousin had despised and rejected me once had recurred to me whenever his name had been mentioned.

When the Ambassador presented him to me, he looked at me full in the eyes, with an expression, as I fancied, of mingled surprise and interest. I returned his gaze a little too defiantly, perhaps, considering the circumstances, but I was hugging my old grudge against him, in order that I might not be too favourably impressed.

"This is the beginning," I was thinking, not without a feeling of pleasurable excitement.

During dinner, whenever I became conscious that Courtenay's eyes were upon me, I turned to the French Ambassador, who had conducted me to the table, and appeared to be deeply absorbed in his conversation. Afterwards, whenever the new military *attaché* made a movement as though to approach me, I pretended to be unaware of his intention, and feigned to be entirely engrossed with somebody else.

Alas, it was not long before I discovered that I had been playing with fire!

When we were all about to separate for the night, I fancied that, as Courtenay held out his hand to me, there was a look as of mute appeal in his eyes. I dared not meet them for more than an instant, my courage having somewhat cooled down, so that it may have been merely imagination upon my part. How, indeed, was it possible that he should come to care so soon whether I appeared to be avoiding him or not?

Sir Courtenay Davenant, who lodged in a boarding-house upon the English quay, was now continually at the Embassy, so that we saw each other almost every day. He interested me deeply, and I surprised myself thinking of him perpetually. I deceived myself into fancying that he occupied my thoughts because of his relationship, because he was the possessor now of my dear old home, and because of the strange circumstances which had brought us together, thus, after long years, in a foreign land. There seemed to be something quite pathetic, too, in the fact that he himself knew nothing whatever of all this; that I was at liberty, if I liked, to probe his mind upon the subject of his country cousin, Nelly, and lead him on to commit himself in a thousand ways.

About ten days after the arrival of the new *attaché*, Miss Warden and I were invited, with the English Ambassador, to join in a large sledging-party. According to Russian custom, we started at midnight, and drove through the snow, in sledges, to a gipsy encampment, at some distance from the city, where, notice of our coming having been given beforehand, we were entertained by the gipsies with music and singing.

The music was altogether different from any that I had ever before heard; wild, pathetic, and for the most part in a minor key. I knew little of the scientific part

of music, but certain combinations had always affected me intensely. As I listened, now, to the plaintive notes that thrilled from the violins, and looked at the weird figures of the musicians, I could not have expressed, in words, the emotions, the memories, the wild regrets, which seemed to crowd in upon me and flood my entire being. I had separated myself a little from the rest of the company, in order that I might enjoy what I now found was not wholly enjoyable, out of hearing of the trivial and common-place conversation which seemed to jar, just then, upon my mood. As I stood leaning against the straight stem of a pine, shrouded in my long fur cloak, I became altogether oblivious, for a while, of my actual surroundings. I cannot recall, however, the place to which I was transported in spirit, nor do I remember whether the longing which came into my heart was connected with any one individual in particular. I think not. I suppose that I was merely what is called "in the clouds," and that it must have been only the music which sent the tears into my eyes.

By-and-by I became aware that somebody was standing quite close to me. Without looking, I knew instinctively that it was Courtenay. Perhaps he had been near me for some time. He spoke, when he saw that I had perceived him, of the gipsies and their playing. Not one of them knew a note of music, he said, in the ordinary sense of the term. They played by ear, or rather by inspiration, composing as they went on. He told me that the children, as soon as they could crawl out of the tents and get hold of a violin, would begin playing upon it as though by instinct. That they were born musicians, that their wild strains had something Oriental about them, and hence their strangeness to ears that, like mine, were only accustomed to the more conventional melodies of the West.

I listened to what he said—conscious, the while, that

his words were words only, that beneath these formal phrases ran a current of deeper feeling, as impossible to translate into speech as all that was just then in my own heart.

The snow had been swept away from where we were standing; but, beyond the space thus cleared, the forest lay shrouded in fleecy whiteness, looking strangely beautiful and picturesque in the bright moonlight. Now and then, from the burdened branches of the fir-trees, little avalanches fell to the earth with a mysterious whispering sound. The voices of the rest of our party, which reached us from time to time, did not prevent me from feeling that Courtenay and I were alone together, far removed, in spirit, at that moment, from all the rest of the world.

I could not tell, of course, what was passing in my companion's mind, but I had imagined at first, from the tone in which he had spoken, that his thoughts might have been somewhat akin to my own. Then, suddenly, I recollected that to him I must seem almost like a stranger; that the kinship which, in spite of myself, had rendered him interesting to me from the first moment of our meeting, was unknown to him; and that he could have no part, therefore, in my wonder at the strange fate which had decreed that we should stand thus together at midnight in a snow-clad Russian forest, listening to this wild music; we were of the same blood, and would have borne the same name if only I had not married!

The remembrance of my marriage—which seemed to have escaped me for the moment—came upon me now like a shock. I realised, with a sigh, that for me the romance of life was over and done with. I might look on, as it were, from afar, at the struggles and triumphs of others; but I could have no part myself in the drama of existence. I was a wife, without the protection or companionship of a husband. I had been a mother, but

had not been permitted to derive either happiness or consolation from my child; and now my life was over, as far as hope or the fostering of tender illusions was concerned; and it seemed to have been all such a mistake!

Although no word of this had escaped me, Courtenay appeared to be conscious that I was oppressed by some sad memory. He inquired whether I was not cold, making me aware, somehow, that this question had no connection with what was passing in his mind. I suppose that, according to the barometer, the temperature must have been many degrees below freezing point; but, wrapped up as I was, I felt impervious to cold. I told Courtenay this, saying, nevertheless, that I would go back to the camp-fires and the sledges.

I must have seemed to him at this time a strange, capricious being indeed! Seeking him at one moment, fleeing from him the next; wayward, headstrong, and subject to all kinds of odd, incomprehensible moods!

"Don't go back yet, I beg of you, Miss Collingwood!" he said, almost beseechingly. "What are all those people to you? Surely this is better—better than anything."

I knew well what he meant: that he was not alluding only to the fairy beauty of the wintry forest. To me, likewise, it seemed "better than anything" to commune with him thus. We had scarcely spoken, it is true; but there are moments when silence is more eloquent than words. I endeavoured to confirm and strengthen myself in the idea that the sympathy with which he inspired me was due merely to our relationship, and that the prejudice I had previously nourished against him may even have had something to do with this revulsion of feeling in his favour. It was simply my sense of justice, I thought, prompting me to reinstate my cousin in my esteem. Nevertheless, "a still, small voice" (the voice of conscience, perhaps) whispered to me that this end having

now been more than achieved, it would be wiser to rejoin the rest of our party.

"I must go," I said, hurriedly.

He looked down at me with eyes full of a mute appeal, but I resisted the unspoken prayer, and we went back to the gipsy camp in silence.

I shall never know quite how it happened that, when the time came for returning home, the old Russian Count, the chief organiser of the entertainment, under whose escort I had started upon the expedition, seemed to have entirely disappeared from the scene. Lord Silchester had driven off first, in company with the Count's wife. Courtenay, who seemed to be always at my elbow, assured me that my former companion must have taken charge of some other lady. "Half the enjoyment of these '*troika*' parties," he declared, "consisted in the knowledge that 'everybody would be almost sure to get paired off wrong;'" and then, with the subdued manner of one who submits to the inevitable, he led me to an empty sledge, and, after carefully wrapping me up in warm furs, took his place by my side, and called out the "*isvostchik*" to drive on.

My heart was beating wildly, but I scarcely knew whether with pleasure or vexation.

"He is bringing it upon himself," I was thinking, desperately. "I have been striving against it with all my strength. His blood be upon his own head!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

How far removed is love, love the absorbing passion, from all its baser counterfeits! Looking back upon life from the calm haven, as it were, of its afternoon, we can perceive that this kind of love was nearly always spontaneous, unpremeditated, unreasonable, leaping into being in spite of obstacles. It refused to be called forth in order to serve a set purpose, or make even the pleasant part of a bargain. Mutual respect and esteem may have fostered it, perhaps, once it had come into existence, but never did it owe its birth to these alone, since it was in so great a measure physical, spiritual, or the result of some strange accident, or chance resemblance. Love the passion—in a word—insisted upon being love, and love alone. It scorned to be beholden to any other emotion, and waxed flickering and enfeebled from the moment when honour, gratitude, or expediency, pressed forward and mixed themselves up in the matter, as they were too often apt to do. It was upon mystery, upon illusion, upon the consciousness of its own madness, that it flourished and luxuriated, and bore delicious fruit. Of all this I knew something, even at one-and-twenty, but during this moonlight drive, with Courtenay at my side, I banished all the wisdom I might have acquired from my mind, and abandoned myself recklessly to the charms of the situation. I forgot everything during these enchanted moments, except that I was near the man whose presence seemed to possess such power to charm and fascinate me. "We are first cousins," I said to myself, striving to salve my conscience, "the next thing to brother and sister—it is but natural that I should recognise him at once as a congenial spirit!"

We glided along through the crisp frosty air for some distance without speaking. The driver dashed on at

what seemed to me a terrific pace, cracking his whip, and occasionally shouting wildly. The bells upon the harness of the three horses jingled merrily, whilst the dry snow was scattered by their hoofs upon either side of the way like white ocean-spray. Then, after a few constrained phrases upon indifferent subjects, I said something about the pleasures of sledging, the novelty, to me, of life in Russia.

"It is a pity that Petersburg is so far from home," I said. "Once one goes away from it, one will probably never see it again."

"*I* have no home," returned Courtenay, rather sadly. "My regiment seemed once to represent the nearest approach to one of which I had ever had any experience, though there is less of this feeling in the Guards than in other branches of the service. Now, however, I have been so much away from it, that scarcely any of the youngsters know me by sight. I look upon myself as a nomad—a citizen of the world—and I am just as much, or as little, at home in one place as another."

I had used the word "home" merely in the abstract but I saw an opportunity now of speaking to him of Northover. I would question him about it, and lead him on to talk of his relations. Later on, when he came to know who I was, he would perceive my motive, and forgive me for my seeming boldness.

"I heard that you had a home, an old country-house in England," I said, therefore, "a place to be quite proud of, and relations—amongst others, an uncle and a cousin."

He looked as though a little surprised at my knowing so much about him.

"Yes," he answered, "a nice old place in England belongs to me now, but somehow, I can't look upon it as *home*. I have never lived there, and I had always avoided contemplating the possibility of its ever becoming mine—I knew that I was my uncle's heir, but I said to myself

that she might either re-marry or survive me. Latterly, however, he became a confirmed invalid."

"The uncle who was the father of your cousin?"

"Yes, my father's elder brother. After his wife's death he took a dislike to society, and shut himself up like a hermit. My cousin, poor girl, must have led anything but a cheerful life with him!"

"I daresay that you used to enliven her sometimes by paying her visits from London?" I remarked, astonished at my own boldness, "that is, if she was young and pretty!"

"Indeed, no! I never went near the place at all! I used to see her during her mother's life-time, when she was quite a baby, but since then I have never set eyes on her!"

"Ah, that was very unkind of you, when you knew that she was leading such a sad existence! I should not have imagined that you would have been so hard-hearted!"

"I was not kept away by indifference," he answered. "I was upon the point of running down to my uncle's place more than once, and I found myself constantly thinking about my poor little cousin, wondering what she was like, and what kind of life she led."

He had thought about me, constantly! How little I had suspected it—from this, at any rate. I might derive some gratification! And yet, in spite of this flattering admission, seeing that he made it, as he must have supposed, to an altogether different woman, I experienced the strange sensation of being, as it were, a little jealous of myself, or rather, of a *former self* that could no longer be said to possess any independent existence, the Helen Davenant of those departed years!

"You thought about her constantly," I remarked, with some bitterness, "and yet you never took the trouble to go near her!"

"I had a reason—a good one, I think," he answered, "for it concerned my cousin's happiness as well as my own. So you must not be so very hard upon me."

"I suppose you were afraid that she might fall in love with you!" I said, assuming a flippant and thoroughly indifferent tone.

"Not at all! What can I have done to make you think me so vain? It was precisely the other way. Being at that time 'heart-whole and fancy free,' it was much more likely that *I* should have fallen in love with *her!*"

"A case of love at first sight! You are, then, very susceptible?"

"Not that I am aware of; but in this respect a man may not be able to form a disinterested opinion of himself. As my cousin was young and pretty, and, I believe, amiable, it would not have been extraordinary if I had become attached to her. There had been some question in the family of our marrying for the benefit of the estate, which would then have been kept together, and I cared about nobody else *in those days.*"

He accentuated these last words, and looked at me with an expression I could not mistake.

I took no notice of it, however, but continued in the same careless tone:—

"There seems, indeed, to have been every combination essential to falling in love! I wonder the family marriage—for the benefit of the estate—did not at once take place."

"There was a strong reason against it, at that time," he answered, "which, all the same—seeing how perversely things work together sometimes—might have acted as an inducement to falling in love. I had made up my mind that I would never marry my cousin on account of the relationship, which, in our particular case, I looked upon as an insurmountable obstacle; and so I thought it best to see as little of her as possible."

"You think, then," I said, "that a man is more likely to fall in love with a woman when he knows it to be impossible that he can marry her; that, with a man, an obstacle always acts as an inducement?"

I suppose that, unconsciously, I was speaking more earnestly than I had spoken before. He looked into my eyes inquiringly.

"Why do you seem so anxious to know this?" he asked. "Is there some obstacle to a marriage in the life of any one you are interested in—of any one you care for?"

"Oh, no!" I answered, carelessly. "I was speaking merely in the abstract, and thinking of no one in particular."

"You spoke very earnestly," he said; "and the words—like all your words—seemed to me to have a particular meaning. But then, ever since I first met you, you have appeared to me to be fraught with all sorts of subtle meanings and mysteries! Your words, your actions, seem like the words and actions of no other woman. Will you think me impertinent if I ask you a question about yourself?"

"No," I answered. "You may ask me what you like."

"Well, then—only please do not think that I inquire from mere idle curiosity—you seem to me to be possessed of such a strange mixture of innocence and experience, of insensibility and emotion. There is a freshness, an ingenuousness, about you, which is as rare as it is delightful. You are at the very opening of life, when you ought to be in the full enjoyment of your youth and beauty; and yet you assume, generally, the manner of one who can have no part in hope, or pleasure, or amusement; of one to whom life can convey no new impressions, no fresh enthusiasms! In a word, young and beautiful as you are, you often speak as though you were older and sadder than

your years—as though some unhappy memory connected with the past prevented you from enjoying any of the pleasures of the present, and I find myself wondering whether this state of mind in a woman is likely to be the result of ignorance or of experience; whether it is due to loneliness of heart and hunger for human sympathy, or to having once known the only kind of sympathy and companionship which it must be a misfortune to lose. Whether—to speak plainly—you care for no one; or whether you have cared in the past for some one who is either absent or dead? Will you tell me if I am right in either of these two conjectures?"

He took my hand as he spoke—under the fur rug—and held it fast clasped in his own. I endeavoured to draw it away, for his words had gone so home to my heart that my eyes were filling with tears.

I was reminded of Hugo in his solitary retreat; of my lost youth, gone from me for ever, as it seemed, whilst I was yet so young in years; of my life, achieved and finished, whilst the warm blood was still coursing in my veins; and of all that might have been save for that which could never, now, be undone as long as I lived.

Courtenay perceived my tears. He looked dreadfully distressed.

"Forgive me! forgive me!" he murmured, still retaining possession of my hand. "To think that *I*, who would willingly die to save you a moment's pain, should have tortured you with my impertinent questions! You know, you must know, what made me venture to speak so plainly. I love you, Miss Collingwood, you must know this; but how madly, how devotedly, you may not know yet! Tell me here, now, when for the first time I have been able to unburden my heart—Can you ever care for me? When we have seen more of each other, and when I may hope to seem less like a stranger to you? Answer me, for pity's

sake, Helen! Is there any reason why we should not love one another and be happy?"

He drew off my glove as he finished speaking, and, holding my hand to his lips, covered it with kisses. I experienced a curious sensation as of having known beforehand that all this must happen. My heart was beating fast. It was filled with a joy and a triumph which were altogether new and enchanting. Then I remembered, and drew my hand away from him by main force.

"Hush; you must not speak to me of such things!" I said, faintly. "It is impossible! Impossible! I am not free! We must not love one another! As you said just now, I can have no part in hope!"

"Have you lost some one you cared for?" he asked, looking at me earnestly, "or are you engaged—promised to some other man?"

"No! Yes!" I answered, confusedly. "I am bound—promised—engaged. I must never care for you as long as I live!"

"How are you 'bound'?" he asked, breathlessly. "By love or by honour?"

And he looked at me as though his hope of everlasting salvation hung upon my reply.

"By honour," I answered, falteringly; "by duty; by compassion . . ."

"But not by affection?" he inquired, eagerly. "You are not in love with another man?"

"Not by the strongest affection," I answered, feeling like one in a dream. "I am in love with no other man."

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, fervently. "Then I should be a fool were I to let my only chance of happiness escape from my hold! I shall pray and strive, now, only for one end—that some day you may belong to me, and be my own wife."

And he would have taken me in his arms had I not thrust him away from me.

"I am not free!" I protested once more. "I am bound, and tied, and engaged! Your marriage to me is as impossible as your marriage to your cousin in England."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

On the morning which preceded the fancy ball at the British Embassy I felt unusually nervous and excited. Until quite lately I had taken no thought as to wherewithal I should be clothed, having resolved so firmly that I would leave St. Petersburg before the entertainment took place. At the eleventh hour, therefore, I had had to consider the important question of dress—a question which had not occupied me much of late, as I had invariably worn black.

Upon this occasion, however, I wished to look my very best. Had I reflected for a moment I might, perhaps, have asked myself wherefore, and whether any good could possibly result from my being even proclaimed the *belle* of the ball (if such a thing could be); but, then, I did not pause to reflect.

Upon one matter I was determined. I would not represent any of the historical personages suggested by Mr. Montagu-Morrison. All the same, I must appear in some costume which would be serious, dignified, and becoming. What a pity that I had not begun to think about it a little sooner! *Now* every dressmaker in the place had been overwhelmed with orders. There seemed to be no hope that anything at all pretty or original could be completed by the appointed day.

Finally, however, after long and wearisome consultations with Miss Warden, Mason, and a sympathetic French *modiste* who was patronised by the Imperial

family, it was arranged that I should appear as "Night." Rather a hackneyed impersonation! Since the first fancy ball upon record there must have been such an enormous number of "Nights." . . . But the part was not a difficult one to represent either as regarded dress or demeanour. I possessed several black evening gowns, and it would be only necessary to dispose upon one of these some of the conventional nocturnal emblems—a star or two, and perhaps a crescent moon, and then all would be well. I should be dressed, too, very much as usual, which would prevent me from feeling shy or self-conscious; and I should be in mourning, as became an orphan, a widow (for was I not now a widow in all but the name?), a childless mother. When once I had decided upon my costume, its arrangement did not take me long. Over a well-fitting ball-dress I was to wear a long black tulle veil, embroidered with silver stars, which was to be fastened to my hair at the back with diamond pins. I wished that I had possessed some diamond stars which I might have worn as a coronet, but I owned very little jewelry of any kind. My father, as the reader is aware, had left his personal property to my cousin, whilst Hugo's sister seemed to have appropriated most of the family jewels of the Crecszoleskis. The few things my husband had given me since my marriage were connected, in my mind, with so many painful memories that I shrank from the notion of wearing any of them at a ball.

Madame Mélanie, the dressmaker who had been consulted, saw a way out of the difficulty, however. She suggested a bat with wings outspread, and actually sent me the creature, stuffed past all hopes of recovery, and mounted upon a long comb, in the same box with my starred veil, before I had had time to remonstrate. I disliked the idea of wearing this weird-looking object, neither bird nor beast—with its monkey-face and wicked

little artificial eyes—upon my head. I remembered to have been told that bats were creatures of evil omen, and I fancied that this one, holding me responsible, perhaps, for its premature demise, might revenge itself after some sinister fashion, or cause a curse to descend upon me like that which followed, in "The Ancient Mariner," upon the killing of the albatross. Nevertheless, when I stabbed the long comb into my hair, I found that this strange headgear was much less unbecoming than I had expected. The black wings disposed themselves like the wings that I had seen upon representations of Mercury, the messenger of the gods, and the effect was certainly picturesque.

Upon the very day of the ball, however, the Ambassador sent for me to his *sanctum*, where, after a few kind words, he handed me a smooth red morocco case. "Take these, my dear Helen," he said, "and wear them this evening in your hair. If they become you as well as I think they will, I must ask you to keep them as a present from your godfather. They belonged to my poor mother. I heard that you wanted diamond stars to complete your costume, and so sent to my banker for these, and they have just arrived by the messenger. I was dreadfully afraid that they might not have got here in time."

I opened the case and beheld seven beautiful diamond stars, set so that they could be worn separately or mounted in the form of a crown. It was impossible to repress an exclamation of pleasure at sight of them. I was deeply touched at my godfather's kindness and forethought, and delighted to have done for ever with the stuffed bat.

I thanked the Ambassador warmly for all the trouble he had taken upon my account.

"I was wishing so much for some stars," I said, "but never imagined such beautiful ones as these! I shall be delighted to wear them to-night, but I could not allow you to make me such a magnificent present. You say that they were your mother's; they should remain in

your family, therefore, and ought not to belong to one who is no relation."

"What relation could be more dear to me than you have become?" he asked, looking at me with regretful tenderness. "I had always meant to give you these stars when you married. But you married under exceptional circumstances, and during all the wretchedness and anxiety that ensued I quite forgot that I still owed you a wedding present. However, if you won't keep them now, I must leave them to you in my will! You will not be injuring anybody by accepting them, for my nephew, Tom Collingwood, is still a bachelor, and, should he marry, he will be quite well enough off to buy jewels for his wife. At any rate you must please me by wearing them to-night."

Miss Warden was loud in her admiration when I showed her the jewels.

"They will look lovely to-night, in your hair," she said; "His Excellency naturally wished you to appear to advantage before the Emperor and the Grand Dukes."

To speak truly, the idea of shining in the eyes of the emperor and the grand dukes had never once occurred to me. My mind, I fear, was entirely pre-occupied by other thoughts. I soon perceived that Miss Warden, whilst dilating upon Lord Silchester's kindness, and upon the beauty of the diamonds, had something of a less agreeable nature upon her mind. I questioned her, and, after some hesitation, she told me what troubled her.

"You will be annoyed, too," she said, "but I ought not to keep anything from you. You will know better what manner to assume this evening to certain people, once you have heard what I have to tell, and you will perceive how very important it was that you should appear at this ball and be publicly presented to the Emperor. What has happened is not very important in itself, for it is impossible to prevent some people from chattering, and

the words of such mischief-makers cannot have much weight in the world. You shall judge of it for yourself, however. His Excellency asked me this morning to make out a fair list of the most distinguished of the guests he is expecting to-night, so as to arrange the order of precedence at supper, and I went, therefore, into that little room at the end of the passage where we wrote out the invitations, because I knew that I should find there some of those nice large sheets of official paper. I wrote on for some time without hearing a sound, then by-and-by I became aware of voices, English voices, proceeding from the next room, which, as you know, is only shut off by folding-doors. Naturally, I had no intention of listening, nor had I any idea that the speakers would allude to subjects of a private nature—I continued writing, therefore, without heeding them. By-and-by, however, one of them mentioned your name, "*la belle Hélène*"; those were the precise words. After that, I confess, I could not resist trying to make out what they were saying about you."

"And what did you hear?" I asked, interested in spite of myself.

"For some time I heard nothing but confused sounds. Then one of the speakers said, with a sneering laugh, 'She made up so violently to poor Dangerfield, your predecessor, that being, as you know, a virtuous man, who has suffered much from the persecutions of the fair sex, he took fright, and actually made a bolt of it to England, without telling her the day—as she had proposed, it seems, that he should escort her home.' I felt terribly indignant, as you may suppose, at hearing this gross misrepresentation of facts."

"Who could have invented anything so malicious?" I exclaimed, angry and wounded. "What can I do to contradict it?"

"Wait until you have heard more, and then we must

think of some way of refuting these calumnies. The voices became too confused immediately afterwards for me to distinguish anything. Both persons seemed to be speaking at once. Then the first speaker, proceeding with his good-natured remarks, went on to say, 'Didn't it strike you at once that the old "duenna," or "sheep-dog," was one of those estimable females who offer their services through the medium of an advertisement, and whose respectable appearance give an aspect of decorum to the most equivocal arrangements?' How true it is, Helen, that listeners never hear any good of themselves!"

"I can guess the name of one of the speakers, at least!" I exclaimed, indignantly; "surely you were able to recognise their voices?"

"I could not fail to do so, of course; but we will talk of that presently. By-and-by, I heard the door open, and then the person who had spoken of me as an 'old sheep-dog,' called out to the other, who was evidently leaving the room, 'Well, being now "first favourite," you're bound, of course, to stick up for her. Only, mark my words, they won't venture to present her to the Emperor to night: she was awfully anxious to shirk the ball altogether.' And then the door banged violently, and I heard no more."

Since then, however, Miss Warden has told me that she did hear just one sentence more, only, fearing to awaken painful recollections, she refrained from repeating it to me at the time. As several things which happened afterwards were probably due to the suspicions which it aroused, I may as well mention at once what it was. After an allusion had been made to "St. Dalmas de Tende," the person who had spoken first remarked, scoffingly, to his companion, "Well, you may believe me or not—just as you like—but all I can swear is, there was a baby!" Of this last shaft, however, as I have already said, I fortunately knew nothing at the time.

"The first speaker," Miss Warden remarked, in conclusion, "was, of course, that horrid little Mr. Morrison. We have somehow offended his vanity, and this is his revenge. The other was your cousin, Sir Courtenay Davenant."

I had been certain of this from the first. The spiteful insinuations respecting Captain Dangerfield, Courtenay's predecessor in the post of military *attaché*, together with the taunt about being now "first favourite" (the only foundation for which must have originated in the fact that my cousin had returned with me from the *troika* party), convinced me that I could not be mistaken in my conjecture.

"How shall I be able to meet Courtenay to-night?" I exclaimed, my cheeks burning with indignation, "knowing that he probably believes all these dreadful insinuations against me? And how can I look that wicked, mischief-making little wretch in the face, who has been trying to prejudice him against us?"

"You will meet them both with the utmost composure, I hope," replied Miss Warden, cheerfully, "and put all your enemies to confusion. You will be standing with that lovely *bouquet* which has been ordered for you, receiving the Emperor and the Grand Dukes at the entrance to the ball-room. This will at once give the lie to Mr. Morrison's aspersions."

I felt so agitated and restless after these revelations, and I tormented myself so persistently by trying to imagine what effect they had produced upon Courtenay, that I found it impossible to settle down to any kind of occupation. When the servant came to us for orders for the afternoon, I asked Miss Warden if she would accompany me for a drive. I was in need of some powerful counter-excitement, and I had suddenly decided upon a plan of action. I would depart from St. Petersburg as soon after the ball as I could conveniently pack up my belongings.

I would not remain a moment longer than I could help in this gossiping, scandal-mongering atmosphere. But I must see Hugo before I went away, if only to remind myself that I was "bound and tied and engaged," as I had said to Courtenay during that delightful moonlight drive; and I would go and see him that very afternoon at the private madhouse.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

I DID not tell Miss Warden of my determination until we had started upon our way. Towards the middle of the *Newsky Prospect* I pulled the check-string of the brougham, and directed the coachman to drive to Dr. Schumann's residence. Miss Warden strove in vain to turn me from my purpose by telling me that I should have waited until His Excellency could have accompanied me.

I replied that His Excellency was so much occupied now with other matters that it was unlikely that he would ever be able to accompany me when, as now, the spirit moved me to visit my husband, and that I preferred, therefore, to go at my own time, although my seeing the Prince must depend, of course, upon the doctor's permission.

We drove on down the long ugly street, which seemed to me upon this occasion to be almost interminable, past the colonnade of the Kazan cathedral and the high walls of the monastery of St. Alexander Newsky—a melancholy-looking pile of white stone in the midst of secluded gardens and surrounded by a moat—and then, leaving behind us the gilded cupolas and minarets of the town, we found ourselves in the suburbs. In another ten minutes we had arrived at the

doctor's villa. I was ushered at once into a kind of study, where I had waited with the Ambassador upon the occasion of my former visit. Miss Warden, who had accompanied me thus far, expressed surprise at our having so easily obtained access to the place. It was, she said, just as if our coming had been expected. The doctor's secretary, a German, presented himself in a few minutes. He had seen me before, and knew that I had obtained permission to visit the Prince, supposing that he was able to receive me. He seemed a little surprised at recognising me.

"Ah, madam, it is you!" he said in English. "You can surely see His Highness to-day—he is composed and in good spirits. There is another lady expected presently. I thought she had now arrived."

"A lady to see the Prince!" I exclaimed, in astonishment, scarcely thinking that this could be.

"Yes," answered the secretary; "a lady—a former acquaintance—wishes to visit His Highness; but she has sent us no name, and I was to see her before she could have permission. The doctor is away for some hours attending a scientific meeting, and those were his orders. He was saying only the other day that if a few former acquaintances, persons who were comparatively indifferent to His Highness, but whose conversation might cheer and enliven him without awakening painful associations, would occasionally visit him it would be beneficial to his health and spirits. This lady was to arrive between three and five o'clock. It is at present nearly four."

I looked at Miss Warden inquiringly. Who, save myself, would be likely to demand an interview with my unfortunate husband? What former female acquaintance would know even of the place of his retreat? No one, I said to myself, except—and here a terrible suspicion flashed across my mind as I thought of Hugo's only remaining kinswoman.

But I dismissed it again almost immediately. No; she

would never venture to come here—I thought; her sudden disappearence shows how much she dreaded running the risk of an arrest. This must be some old friend of whom I have never heard! . . .

Nevertheless, the mention of this mysterious visitor had added considerably to the nervousness from which I was already suffering.

The secretary, who, as well as the doctor, had been made acquainted with my secret, apparently attributed my emotion to jealousy.

"Be sure, madame," he said, "that if this person is no lady—if she should be in any way objectionable—I shall bring her His Highness's excuses. In any case she will not be permitted to see him alone."

I thanked him, scarcely knowing what I said, and he then left us in order to apprise the Prince of my arrival.

He returned in a few minutes, which had been fraught for me with all kinds of conflicting emotions.

"His Highness will see you with pleasure," he said. "I shall leave you with him apparently alone, retiring to an adjoining room. But I shall merely let fall the *portière* without closing the door; thus, without hearing your conversation, or interrupting it, I shall be close at hand should you require me."

I was too overcome by my feelings to make any reply, and I followed him with a beating heart to the Prince's apartments.

Upon being ushered into a large comfortably furnished room, I saw, awaiting me, a strange, unfamiliar figure, wearing a grey beard, a long clinging white robe, and gold-rimmed spectacles. I started back alarmed at this weird apparition. The secretary had disappeared behind the *portière*. Hugo and I were apparently alone together. For a few seconds we confronted one another in silence.

My heart was full; I could not have spoken a word had my life depended upon it.

Then, with a kind of low moan like that of some animal in pain, this utter stranger, for so he seemed to me, bearing no resemblance that I could then discover to the man who had been my husband, stretched out his long arms, as I have seen people do in fun when they have wished to frighten children by pretending to be ghosts. They closed tightly round me and I was pressed to his heart. I felt his breast-bone hard and sharp against my bosom. He had grown terribly thin and angular. I thought of the embrace of the spectre-lover and shuddered.

"*At last!*" he exclaimed, with a long-drawn sigh, and then, leading me to a chair, he sat down by my side.

I was in one of those hysterical, over-sensitive moods to which we women are occasionally subject, and which seem to most men to be so incomprehensible and ridiculous. I was in want of consolation, and had been vaguely expectant of finding it here in its most sufficing form—that of consoling another. I desired, too, to be protected and shielded against the new and engrossing interest which was springing up in my heart. I had been thinking, during my wintry drive, of that morning at St. Hippolyte, a morning all softness and sunshine, scented with southern blossoms, when I had stood in the old Italian garden and looked up at Hugo's windows, upon the day when I had come so very near to being in love with him; and of how, responsive to my unuttered longing, he had flung back the green shutters and stepped out upon the balcony, in his well-fitting grey suit, made by an English tailor; and of how, when he was at my side, he had taken my hand, and had seemed to understand all that was in my heart. I had not recalled what the Ambassador had told me about the change in the Prince's appearance—his long beard, and the strange unearthly dress he had adopted, and had been expecting to see the same man (outwardly, at least) from whom I had been parted so suddenly at Monte Carlo —the man at whom all the prettily-dressed ladies upon

the terrace had gazed with eyes of admiration, because he was so handsome and so distinguished-looking.

Now, certainly, the woman whose regard or affection could be shaken on account of any change which might have been wrought by sorrow or suffering in the appearance of husband, lover, or friend, would seem, at first, to be a creature utterly to be despised. And yet, this same change may so have transformed the man she knew before that he may appear to her altogether in the light of a stranger, to whom she cannot at once transfer the feelings he had previously inspired.

Such was the sad position in which I now found myself. Hugo, as I had known him once, had departed as utterly as if I had seen him lying dead before me, and in his stead had arisen this weird, Druid-like apparition, seeming more like a denizen of another world than a living, breathing creature of flesh and blood! Then, too, I had always nourished quite an unreasonable prejudice against a beard. I did not object to it in its place, but this place seemed to me to be only upon the chins of blind beggars, early Christians, and Plantagenet kings. My father's beard had changed him so much. Perhaps my prejudice may have originated in my horror of change.

I looked at Hugo, wondering and disheartened. His beautiful eyes were as large and luminous as ever; the dark circles under them had increased, and his features looked even more finely cut than heretofore because of his extreme thinness. There was a peculiar look, however, about his face, as of a death's-head, due to the hollowness of the eyes, the breadth of the low brow, and to the accentuation of the upper jaw with its even white teeth, from each side of which the flesh had fallen away; that produced a most painful impression upon me as I gazed at him. When I could speak, I asked him how he came to assume so strange a garb?

He replied (as far as I could afterwards remember)

that, for certain purposes, certain garments had been deemed the most appropriate; the seeker after occult mysteries wearing, in the old days, an ephod of white linen, "because of its abstracted quality for magic," for which purpose his present dress, with some few additions, would be suitable also. He had adopted it, however, having in his mind the shrouds of the Sabean star-worshippers, who had done for ever with the world.

"I, too," he went on, speaking slowly in the old familiar voice which seemed to belong now to another man, "have done altogether with the material world. It was once my most ardent desire to have done with it, years ago, before I saw your beloved face, and now that I have lost you, what is left to me but the pursuit of those studies in which I was always interested, and which are invested now with a terrible importance in my mind? How much have I yet to learn—how much to investigate! Had I known more, in the past, of the secret and potent forces which are at times opposed to us, I might not now have been here—a man who is even as one departed, wearing, appropriately, the garments which are reserved for the dead. And yet, may not that which appears at first like a misfortune be converted into a blessing? This is what I ask myself continually. The answer that comes to me is different according to my different moods."

"And to-day, Hugo," I asked, "in what mood are you? Has it made you any happier to see me?"

"Happier and unhappier," he answered sadly, "if I may say this without appearing ungrateful. Events have so revolutionised my existence that what would have been a pleasure in former days, becomes, now, nothing more than a misery and a regret. I can have no part now in the life that you are living; our pathways are distinct and apart, and so they will be to the end. The life which I am endeavouring to live (the *higher life* as I have come to consider it) is disturbed and embarrassed by all that

recalls any previous existence; for I am trying to persuade myself that this visitation is only a blessing in disguise, and that had I remained much longer in the world—surrounded by men and women intent upon earthly matters—all of them voluntarily deafening and blinding themselves to the manifestations of the spirit—I must have become altogether materialised and unfitted for anything better. *You*, too, my beloved Helen, my 'good angel,' as I used once to call you, you would have assumed for me in time the character of a temptress—with your beauty, your charm, your power of idealising the prosaic home-life! Had we remained together any longer in that southern paradise I should have become nothing better than a confirmed voluptuary, sunk in mere sloth and selfish indulgence, from which there would have been no reclaiming me!"

"And so you would prefer that I did not come to see you?"

"That you did not come, Helen, or that you could remain with me always," he answered, "and for this reason. Originally, as even *you* must be aware, we possess two distinct natures—the spiritual and the carnal ('the human and the divine,' should you prefer these terms)—which are for ever warring with one another in our veins. Hence arise discord, confusion, and the dangerous agents we speak of as 'passion' and 'impulse.' I am endeavouring now to separate these two incongruous companions—these restless combatants—and to cast one of them utterly away from me, so that one alone, the purer and calmer influence, may remain in possession of the citadel, where all would then be harmony and contentment. The sight of you, together with all the memories that come to me in your presence, must prevent or retard the accomplishment of this dream. You understand me, my Helen? As a man, I long for, and desire, your presence, but I have done now with the life of a man, and

everything that recalls it is dangerous to the development of the spirit."

"No doubt the calmer and purer life, if one could only attain to it, would be happier than this perpetual struggle!" I said, my thoughts wandering away to the struggles and temptations that lay in my own path.

"To me it would of necessity be happier," he answered, still speaking very seriously. "It is true that my physical action is controlled, but my spiritual existence is free and uncircumscribed. No vampires can sap the vitality of this better life which I might enjoy to the fullest, looking down upon the material life as though from a mountain. Below me I should see the little struggling world that I used to inhabit—the small square green fields, all cut up and apportioned, with the flocks and herds scattered upon them, looking like white dots. The cities, too, and the little men and women, seeming no bigger than tiny black flies, now holding themselves aloof one from the other, now swarming and buzzing together for some futile purpose, whilst I should be far, far above them all, in an atmosphere favourable to the development of a perfect mental and moral hygiene, and to the nearer contemplation of the most important mysteries."

He continued talking for some time in this strain, making use of many names and expressions which I could not afterwards remember. He was in want, he said, of books bearing upon the subjects in which he was interested.

"For see," continued he, "to what I am reduced!" and he pointed to several books which were lying scattered about upon the tables—"to Jacob Behmen, Claude de Saint Martin, and Kirchberger; to Johann Valentin Andreas, and the 'god-illuminated fraternity of the Rosicrucians!' But of the records of modern research, of the outcome of modern intelligence, nothing, absolutely nothing!"

He alluded then to several works upon mesmerism,

spiritualism, and what he termed "the secret hermetic science," and wrote down a list of books which he wished me to obtain for him in London, from a bookseller in Covent Garden. He took up a volume which lay open upon a writing table, and from which he said he had been reading when my arrival had been announced to him. It was called "*Le Comte de Gabalis, ou entretiens sur les Sciences Secretes.*"

"An obsolete work," he explained, "which I had just opened, merely for mental relaxation, but which contains, nevertheless, the rudiments of much sound teaching. Confess, Helen, that it was strange that, just as I finished reading this passage, I should have been informed of your arrival!"

He re-assumed the gold spectacles which he had been wearing when I entered the room, and read aloud a few paragraphs from the pages before him. I gathered from these that the author of the work disapproved altogether of woman's influence, to which he seemed to attribute all the ills which have accrued to the human race ever since the fall of Adam. "Man," according to the *Comte de Gabalis*, "should endeavour to ally himself only with nymphs, sylphides, and the elemental spirits."

"In these opinions," remarked the Prince, smiling sadly, "I am endeavouring to become a disciple of the old Rosicrucian!"

I perceived now that, as the Ambassador had said, the Prince was not changed in anything but appearance. To use Lord Silchester's words, he was "no more mad now" than he had been when I had met him for the first time. As then, he was quiet, gentle, serious, and somewhat stilted in his mode of expression; but yet, because of this mere external difference, which I suppose ought to have counted for very little with any reasonable woman, it was as though the Hugo of the Villa St. Hippolyte was dead and buried to me for ever. This new man, albeit speaking

with the dead Hugo's voice and sharing in all his extraordinary opinions, could never do me the service I had come, unconsciously, to crave of him. He could never become, however much I might strive to delude myself upon the subject, the rival, the vanquisher of that other encroaching influence. It asserted itself as strongly, nay, more strongly than ever, even now as I was sitting by his side. And *he*, too—he had just confessed it—was striving hard to drive me out of his heart. My visits could make him no happier; they had, indeed, rather a tendency the other way; whilst to me they could bring only a fresh consciousness of my misery.

Why did I ever come to St. Petersburg at all?

We conversed for some time longer upon different subjects—the climate of St. Petersburg, the establishment maintained for the Prince by Dr. Schumann—and then I was again reminded not to forget to obtain the books upon my return to England.

Hugo made no direct allusion to the subject of his crime, nor did he do more than refer vaguely to the birth and death of our child. I was conscious that all this was in his mind, however. Perhaps he could not trust himself to speak about it.

"You understand?" was all he said, looking at me very earnestly. "You understand and forgive, since your mind can realise that there are mysteries of impulse and inspiration that cannot now be fathomed or explained. And *I*, too, my Helen, *I understand*, and am grateful to you for everything—for all that you have endured and suffered—for more than I am able to speak about now!"

When I bade him farewell, tears, as of tenderness and regret, came into his large luminous eyes. *I*, too, was profoundly affected. He took my hand, and seemed to be about to raise it to his lips. He dropped it, however, almost immediately, as though it had been a scorpion. I could only think that this sudden movement had some-

thing to do with the Count de Gabalis and the Rosicrucians. But it appeared that I was wrong.

"You are not desiring to turn me from any good purpose?" he asked, anxiously and in an altered voice. "You did not come here with an unfriendly disposition towards me in your heart?"

"No, Hugo," I answered in surprise, "you must know that I have no unfriendly feeling! You have just said that I could understand and forgive. Why did I come to Petersburg at all if not to comfort and cheer you?"

"That is well," he replied, still speaking as with nervous anxiety; "but at that moment, just as I came nearer to you, I was conscious of an influence that was formidable and sinister—of a will that would strive cruelly and mercilessly against mine, obtaining in the end the dominion; of a spiritual danger, in fact, which seems still to be menacing and advancing. I must be upon my guard!"

He shuddered, and then paced restlessly up and down the apartment. As he came towards me I perceived that the expression of calm resignation which I had previously observed upon his face had entirely vanished. He had grown pale and miserable-looking in a moment!

I made every endeavour to reassure him. He did not appear to hear me, however, but continued pacing up and down as though in the greatest alarm and agitation. I watched him for some time in silence, not knowing what further to say, and then, fearing that this strange conduct might be, perhaps, the forerunner of some sort of nervous crisis, I took advantage of the moment when his back was towards me to push aside the *portière*, and before he had turned to confront me again we were joined by the doctor's secretary, in whose presence I again bade him farewell.

Miss Warden, when I rejoined her, was all impatience to hear an account of my interview. But I could hardly

speak from emotion, and so entreated her to leave me in peace for awhile. She regretted that I had come at all, and implored me to control myself lest it should be remarked at the ball that I had been weeping. I felt hopeless, rudderless, desolate. It seemed to me that I now stood entirely alone in the world, subject to all the buffets of fate, to all the assaults of temptation. The sight of poor Hugo had in no way aggravated my position, of course, but it had brought vividly before me certain stern facts that I had lately been foolish enough at times to ignore. I was "bound and tied" indeed, and to a being to whom I could be of no comfort or service whatsoever. It was not possible for me, even if I had ever really loved him (and about this I was becoming more and more doubtful every day), to feel for him now any sentiment warmer than a melancholy compassion. Nay, had tenderer emotions arisen in my breast at sight of him, Hugo himself would probably have been the first to repel them, since he had decided to cast from him all human affections. And yet, whilst he and I continued to exist upon this miserable earth, I could love no other man without committing a deadly sin!

As soon as the door of the brougham was closed upon us I buried my face in my hands, and gave free vent to my tears. I was aroused, before we had reached the lodge of the *concierge*, by a sound of approaching wheels, and soon afterwards, a close carriage passed us, driven with great speed up the approach.

I looked out eagerly, thinking that this must be the mysterious lady who had wished for an interview with the Prince, and whose existence I had, for the moment, entirely forgotten. But the carriage window, upon the side nearest to us, was closed, and all that I could distinguish, in a momentary glance, was a woman's neatly gloved hand holding a large bunch of yellow mimosa.

CHAPTER XL.

UPON reaching the Embassy I went at once to my bedroom. Mason was there, setting out my things for the evening. My black dress and starred veil were lying upon the bed, but I took no heed of them. Mason, a sensible, discreet woman of nearly sixty, as far as one could judge by her appearance, was, as I have already said, entirely in my confidence. She had been like a second mother to me ever since the days of my earliest childhood, and it was my intention, upon the morrow, to tell her all about my visit to my husband. *Now*, however, I felt in no mood for conversation. Mason, herself, was of a reserved and quiet disposition, and well accustomed to my frequent fits of depression. She assisted me to take off my hat and cloak in silence, after which I threw myself into an arm-chair, and, a prey to my own melancholy reflections, soon forgot that I was not alone in the room. I started, therefore, in a few minutes, at hearing my maid's voice—

"A curious thing has happened this afternoon, Miss Helen," she said; it was by this name that she had been told to continue to address me—"and as there may be more in it than I can see, I should wish you to know of it. I'm afraid you may think, perhaps, that I said too much, but I was completely thrown off my guard. I have thought to myself since, however, that even if anybody *did* find out who you are, there would be no such very great harm, after all, particularly as we hope to be going away from here so soon."

I turned to where she was standing, and saw that she held in her hand the *bouquet* I was to carry at the ball. This was a real triumph of the florist's skill. Flowers

arranged more naturally would have looked much prettier, I thought; but then this *bouquet* was intended to be symbolical. The crescent moon, so indispensable as an accessory of "Night," embracing a single star, was ingeniously picked out in white violets, upon a ground composed of the purple variety. The whole was surrounded by delicate hothouse ferns, and was so large and heavy that I wondered how I should be able to bear the burden of it for the whole evening.

"This hadn't been sent home by the afternoon," Mason continued; "it was promised at three o'clock, to—make sure, as the tradespeople here seem to be very unpunctual—and so, as Miss Warden wanted one or two little things, I went out with one of the girls, and looked in at the flower-shop, to hurry them, on my way back, as they told me the people there spoke English. There were two ladies in the shop when we went in, beautifully dressed both of them, speaking French, and looking over the flowers. I saw your nosegay in the window, with several others, set out for the whole town to stare at, and I pointed it out to the flower-woman. Not understadning me, and thinking that I wanted to buy it, she said that it was for the young lady at the British Embassy, who was going to the ball as "Night." I tried to make her understand that I wanted to take it away with me, so as to have it in good time, as there was to be a dinner-party first, and you would be sure to dress early. Then, one of the ladies, who must have heard everything I said, came forward, and explained to the woman in French, and she then allowed me to have the *bouquet* after I had written down my name in a book. All this time the ladies seemed to be watching me, and I was wishing that I could have a good look at them, in a better light, because the face of the one who had spoken to me seemed to be so very familiar, and her voice, too; and yet, at first, I could not remember who she was so like. Then it all came back to my mind,

but I thought to myself that it was quite impossible—that she was so beautifully dressed, and looked quite like a lady, and that I must be mistaken, as all French people were a good deal alike. Before I went out of the shop she turned and said something to the other lady, after having read my name, as I suppose, in the book—for I had written down my own name instead of 'Miss Collingwood,' which I thought best not to put upon paper if I could avoid it, under the circumstances, and then, to my surprise, she came running after me, and said, in quite a pleasant, friendly kind of way, 'Good day to you, Mrs. Mason! evidently you have not a good memory for your old friends!' and she laughed, and showed her white teeth, and then I saw that she was no other than the person I had fancied she was at first, your poor mama's French maid, '*Ma'mselle*,' as we used to call her, that was with her ladyship at the time of her death. You were too young to be able to remember her."

I have just said that Mason was entirely in my confidence; perhaps I used the word "entirely" unadvisedly. She knew this much, at least, that I had been privately married to Prince Creczoleski—that I had become a mother—that my husband had been arrested and accused of a crime—that he had been since declared to be irresponsible for his actions, and that, on this account, I was anxious, during my sojourn at St. Petersburg, to drop the name and title which were mine by right, but which were now fraught with so many painful associations. Of the occult mysteries, the complicated ramifications, the "wheels within wheels," which were connected with my strange story, she knew nothing whatsoever. How could her simple mind have grasped the full significance of the twin brothers' prophetic dream, or of poor Hugo's dominated "volitional power"? Of my terrible suspicions with regard to Celestine Vigon she likewise knew nothing, for as yet they were suspicions only, which, at this

distance of time, I saw no possibility of proving. Mason, therefore, could have known of no reason why the name of the Frenchwoman should sound hateful for all time in my ears. She was merely vexed to think that, taken unawares, she had led Celestine to understand that I was residing at the British Embassy, and that she might have betrayed to her the fact that I was not really "Miss Collingwood."

"For I knew" (she went on) "that you so particularly wished everything to be kept secret now that Sir Courtenay has come out here, but not expecting to see *Ma'mselle*, and dressed just like a lady, too!—I was completely taken by surprise. 'I suppose, *Ma'mselle*' (I said), 'that you must have got married?' and she looked first at the other lady and laughed, and then she said, 'Yes, yes, of course I am married! I have got now quite another name! And your little young lady, Miss Nelly' (she said), 'has she not found a husband by this time? And I was so put off my guard by this question that I'm afraid I must have looked quite foolish. First I said 'Yes,' and then 'No,' and then I very stupidly said, 'These flowers are for Miss Nelly,—she will carry them to-night at the ball,' and then the other lady stepped forward and said in English, 'They are for the young lady who is staying with the English Ambassador?' and she was such a fine, proud-looking lady (a *real* lady, I feel sure this one was), and she looked at me so hard, that I felt I must answer 'Yes,' whether I wished it or no. I was quite provoked with myself afterwards, but it seemed all to have happened before I had had time to take thought! Since then I have been saying to myself, however, that perhaps it didn't so very much signify after all, as you expect to be going back to England so soon, and I daresay I shall never hear of her again. She isn't likely, now that she's married, and fancies herself quite a lady, to come here and pay a visit to one of the servants, and she knows quite well that you would never remember her!"

"I remember her perfectly," I said, and the face of the Frenchwoman, with her regular, somewhat massive features, her white teeth, and long gold earrings, rose up before me as vividly as when I had last beheld her in the flesh. "But the other lady," I inquired anxiously, "the lady who asked you whether I was not staying with the Ambassador, what was she like? I have a reason for wishing you to describe her to me exactly."

"That, I'm afraid, miss, I shall never be able to do," replied Mason, who seemed, nevertheless, to be recalling her impressions, "for she wore a thick black veil over the top part of her face, with a border which was ever so much thicker still, so that I could only see her eyes, looking through at me very hard, but what coloured eyes they were I can't say, I'm sure. Her nose wasn't a hooked nose, of that I could make certain, because her veil hung straight down over it, and when she smiled I could see that she had very even white teeth. Her figure was tall and fine, and she wore a long brown velvet cloak trimmed with beautiful fur, and a cap of the same fur upon her head. I saw her hair at the back of it—very dark hair indeed—done up in thick black coils—but most of the time she was smelling at a large bunch of that sweet drooping yellow stuff that used to grow in the garden at Nice—I suppose here it must be raised in a hot-house—and what with that and the veil I couldn't manage to see much of her face."

She had seen quite enough, however, to fill me with all kinds of sinister forebodings. I cross-examined her as to the hour at which she had visited the flower-shop. As far as she could judge, she said, it must have been very nearly four o'clock. She had gone straight back afterwards to the Embassy, where tea was always served in English fashion punctually at five, and she was not told that it was ready until some time after her return. This served but to confirm my apprehensions. No wonder

that poor Hugo had been conscious of the approach of some formidable and sinister influence! At that moment I must have been just entering Dr. Schumann's waiting-room. My interview with Hugo, although it had seemed to me to be almost interminable, could not have lasted much more than half-an-hour; the drive from the flower-shop to the doctor's villa would have occupied about the same space of time, and it was not five o'clock by Miss Warden's watch when the brougham with the high-stepping horses had dashed past us, at the closed window of which I had descried a woman's gloved hand holding a large bouquet of mimosa; "the sweet drooping, yellow stuff," which, as Mason said, used to grow in the garden—that well-remembered garden!—at Nice. And yet I was perfectly certain that both Hugo and Lord Silchester had described Countess Dobrowolska as a fair woman with very light hair. In the "thick black coils" to which Mason had alluded, there lurked the materials for still further mystification!

CHAPTER XLI.

By half-past eleven o'clock nearly all the most distinguished of the Ambassador's guests had arrived. I stood at the entrance of the ball-room, behind my enormous *bouquet*, where I was presented by His Excellency to the Emperor and two of the Grand Dukes who accompanied him. The Emperor conversed with me for a few minutes, and then invited me to dance the opening quadrille.

I did not remember at the moment that this act on the part of His Imperial Majesty was what Miss Warden had looked to as an effectual means of silencing the voices of

my detractors, until the face of Mr. Morrison, wearing an expression of impertinent wonder, recalled the fact to my memory.

There is no need for me to describe the ill-fated Alexander II. To most of my readers his countenance will be familiar through his portraits. To me, the face was an interesting one. I have fancied since that I could perceive upon it a look as of predestination to a tragic doom, which was afterwards so cruelly fulfilled, but one is apt, sometimes, to imagine these things afterwards. I knew through Lord Silchester that the Czar was acquainted with my story. He made no allusion to it, however, during the dance, but whilst conducting me back to my place near the doorway, he remarked very gravely, speaking in French:

"I am charmed to have made your acquaintance, madame. The family of your husband has always been loyal to us. I hope Prince Crecszoleski resigns himself with courage to his misfortunes?"

I suppose that I made some sort of becoming answer, but just at that moment I had discovered that Courtenay Davenant, in his Guards' uniform, was standing quite close at hand, looking at me sadly and earnestly with his dark eyes. My heart seemed suddenly to stand still and ache in my breast. I do not know how I could have found words to reply to the Emperor at all.

We women are too apt to suppose that a man, upon certain occasions, will behave precisely as we should behave ourselves, and when, as generally happens, he acts upon an entirely different system, our disappointment and mortification often reach a pitch which he is utterly unable to comprehend or account for.

Judging by myself, I fancied that I knew, now, exactly what Courtenay would do. He would not approach me, of course, whilst I was upon the arm of the Czar, but he would hover close at hand, watching his opportunity, and

when it came he would engage me for a dance. This, however, would be merely a pretext. Probably, we should not dance at all. He would lead me away upon his arm, through the whole suite of brilliantly-lighted rooms, to one of the most retired of the smaller apartments beyond, and here, perhaps, though how I knew not, I might be able —in the course of our conversation—to refute some of the malicious insinuations which had reached his ears. I might say, at any rate, that one ought not to believe all the idle stories one heard, and that there were people in the world who seemed to make it their business to "fetch and carry" and invent untruths. Woman-like, I next set about composing some sort of answer upon his part—words such as I hoped he would say—something kind and chivalrous, of course, with a touch of gentle reproach at the notion that I could ever have imagined him capable of believing anything to my disadvantage. It is always dangerous to go on thus, making so certain that the breasts of others are aglow with our own peculiar emotions, and that expression will be given to them in words, after our own hearts!

The Emperor left me with a stiff bow, whilst I was in the midst of these reflections. He turned to address a Russian lady in gorgeous national costume. I was now free, and Courtenay would be able to come forward and speak to me if he liked.

I cast a hurried glance at one of the long looking-glasses with which the ball-room was almost entirely surrounded, and was pleased, on the whole, with what I beheld, and glad to think that I had resisted all persuasions to appear in any more garish costume. Severe and subdued as my dress was, it stood relieved against those of the brilliant company, and thus had the advantage of being unostentatiously remarkable. Lord Silchester's family diamonds, too, looked beautiful. Even in the midst of the splendid jewels which shone upon every side they held their own. What with my black dress, and these glitter-

ing stars, Courtenay would have no difficulty in singling me out from the crowd whenever he wanted to find me. Probably he was making his way to me now.

I glanced anxiously towards the place where I had seen him standing, but could not perceive him. I did not allow myself to feel disappointed, so certain did I feel that he would come and seek for me soon. I was only fearful lest, in the meantime, some one would invite me to dance whom I might not be able to refuse, and that, thus, the moment of our meeting might be delayed. This was just what happened. I perceived the Ambassador making his way towards me accompanied by a male figure in some manner of grotesque costume, which I should have found it difficult to explain had not His Excellency presented to me, forthwith, a Polish Count, personating for the evening, as he at once informed me, "*Charles Trois, Roi d'Angleterre,*" more commouly described as "the Young Pretender," whence I assumed that his strange garb was intended to represent a kilt.

"He is one of the greatest bores in Russia," the Ambassador whispered in my ear, "but try and endure him for a little while!"

I am afraid that just then the most brilliant of human beings must have seemed to me to be a "bore," so entirely was my mind preoccupied!

We walked off together, down to the further end of the ball-room; for, embarrassed as the Count was with kilt, philibeg, and claymore, and *I*, with my long floating veil, we agreed that it would be unwise to attempt to dance in such a crowd. Some remarks which I made upon my companion's costume—quite absently and abstractedly, my eyes roving about from right to left in search of a scarlet uniform — led him to speak of the unfortunate Prince he was personating. He could boast, he said, of some of the blood of the Sobieskis. He possessed several interesting Jacobite relics, which he would be very

pleased to show me at some future day. The dress he was wearing upon the present occasion was accurately copied from an authentic Scotch medal, on the reverse of which was a figure of Victory blowing a trumpet, and flying over London with a crown in her left hand. . . . . I listened to all this like one in a dream. At any other time I should have been much interested in the Count's conversation, for, like most young and romantic persons, I was an enthusiastic admirer of the Stuarts, perhaps because I had not been destined to live beneath their sway, and, even as it was, my acquaintance with their history enabled me to say a word, here and there, to the purpose, notwithstanding my wandering thoughts.

After walking about for a while, we established ourselves upon a sofa, whence we could look down the entire length of the room, which had now become very much crowded. Two thousand people had been invited, very few of whom had excused themselves, and the supper-room had not yet been opened. The scene was dazzling in its brilliancy, though somewhat bewildering, also, by reason of its incongruity. This cannot fail to be the case at a fancy ball where hardly any restrictions have been imposed with regard to the character or epoch of the dresses; and, in this instance, Lord Silchester had only begged his guests to adhere to two conditions. He knew an Englishman who had once given great offence, abroad, by appearing at a fancy ball dressed as the Devil; and an English lady who, going into the other extreme, had outraged continental susceptibilities by assuming the becoming garb of a nun. So monks, nuns, priests, and devils, had been tabooed; but personages in modern uniforms—naval, military, and diplomatic—brigands, picturesque peasants, *pierrots*, and French *chefs*, were mingling heterogeneously with Roman Emperors, Egyptian Queens, Crusaders, Watteau shepherdesses, and allegorical impersonations. In truth, a motley crew!

As I was seeking vainly for Courtenay amongst all these, a figure, wearing a black domino, came up to where we were sitting, and endeavoured to mystify us by the making of strange signs and gestures. Rather a short man—I could see this at once, as only his feet were visible below the sombre folds of his disguise. My heart did not beat any faster, therefore; I knew that this could not be the one I was so longing to see. All the same, I felt a little frightened. A domino—whatever its colour—is, I think, a very hideous dress. This one, with its ghastly black mask, reminded me of the discarded stuffed bat.

"*C'est un Anglais*," whispered the "Young Pretender," glancing down at the stranger's boots, and perceiving, I suppose, something insular about them.

"Ah, the chaste Diana with her crescent moon!" exclaimed the "mask," in a squeaky voice, which was evidently assumed.

"Who are you?" I asked, shrinking away from him with an involuntary feeling of horror.

"A friend," answered the squeaky voice, "one who knows more about you than you would think. I can tell you who gave you those beautiful diamonds."

Something in the tone in which these words were pronounced made me recognise the voice of Mr. Morrison. I felt indignant that this man, after having maligned me behind my back, should venture thus to banter me familiarly in public. The warm blood came into my cheeks as I replied—

"You are no friend; you are an enemy; an enemy of the most treacherous and dangerous kind! You slander those who have never injured you, when they are powerless to defend themselves. I pity those who have many friends like you!"

The words seemed to strike home. He withdrew precipitately, and was soon lost in the crowd.

"You ought not to be so angry, *mademoiselle!*" said my kilted companion, in French, looking at me in reproachful wonder, "*ce n'est que du persiflage!*"

He understood English, although unable to speak it, and appeared astonished at my warmth.

I returned to where I had received the company, as soon as I was free from "one of the greatest bores in Russia."

Poor man! the Ambassador informed me afterwards, that he had found me "charming." He must have been very indulgent, I thought, and very easily pleased!

So the miserable evening dragged on. I had been conducted to supper by the Emperor, where I had made a pretence of eating and drinking. Afterwards, I had made a pretence of dancing, and of talking with various people who appeared to me like so many hollow phantoms. Everything seemed to have grown shadowy and unreal, and far off, except the eager yearning at my heart. I kept on wondering whether I might not be merely dreaming one of those provoking, uncomfortable dreams where nothing will ever come right; where the doors persistently refuse to shut, and the windows to open; where letters arrive which are impossible to decipher; dresses which, somehow, cannot be made to fit; and where all the people we love best in the world seem to turn suddenly into our bitterest foes. And, all the while, the music—the passionate, maddening, disconsolate, music; sounding joyful, no doubt, to other ears; but, to mine melancholy as the wailing of disembodied spirits at midnight, and "wild with all regret,"—went on rising, and swelling, and dying, in pathetic, lingering minor cadences, and thrilling me to the very depths of my being, until it was with difficulty that I could restrain myself from breaking down and sobbing aloud.

As I passed out of the supper-room, in the royal procession, I had come face to face with the man for whom

I was seeking. A pretty girl, wearing patches and powder, was upon his arm. He was smiling at something she was saying, so *he* at least, was not unhappy! They drew to one side, and both bowed low to the Czar. I looked eagerly and miserably into Courtenay's face when he lifted his eyes. For an instant they met my own. He must have read in them something of the desolation that was in my heart. But then, the Imperial personages had passed on—and I along with them—and he and his powdered shepherdess had gone on their way to supper. Since then he had never approached me; and now the Emperor and his suite had departed, and I heard people saying that the real amusement of the evening was only now about to begin.

"*Amusement!*" I thought, bitterly. "Yes, I suppose, after a fashion, all these people are amusing themselves Their hearts are filled with bright and pleasant impressions. To-morrow there will be long accounts in the newspapers, descriptive of the splendours of the entertainment, and everybody we meet will congratulate us upon its success! And yet, to me, what an evening of gloom and disappointment! How shall I ever be able to endure it to the end, if, as I have heard, it is likely to go on until the small hours of the morning? How shall I think of it ever afterwards without the keenest misery and humiliation?" And then, the worst of it was, I had felt so certain that Courtenay would have behaved altogether differently. The man who, only such a short while ago, had professed for me so much love and admiration, surely his heart could not have become estranged so soon! Why had he slighted me thus to-night, and behaved to me almost as though I had been an enemy, and given me all this unnecessary pain?

I daresay that almost every woman will be able to understand why I felt so forlorn and miserable; whilst to a man it may appear strange that I should have made

so much of so little; and that this different way of looking at things springs merely from the difference in our natures. It pervades everything, I suppose, and accounts for many things that we women weep over and lament for, and often even break our hearts about!

The ball-room had thinned considerably now; many of the guests were doubtless regaling themselves at the supper-table. Others had retired to slip on dominos, for purposes of mystification.

I stood aloof, near to the door by which the company had arrived—a part of the room which was now well-nigh deserted—feeling in no mood for conversation. Here I again caught sight of myself in one of the long mirrors, and was quite startled at the change which some two hours of anxiety and disappointment had wrought in my appearance. I looked now haggard and miserable. My black and silver dress, too, presented quite a funereal aspect; the flowers and ferns in my *bouquet* were drooping and faded; and my diamond stars were twinkling, as though in mockery, over my pale cheeks and hopeless eyes. Nothing that I had passed through "'twixt matins and evensong" had ever affected me like this!

I know not wherefore, as I stood thus, contemplating this melancholy image, I should have travelled back, in fancy, to the evening of my first ball at Ingleby Grange; but so it was; and then I set to work, and began to make foolish, unprofitable comparisons, such as we women cannot resist making sometimes. I thought of the handsome, distinguished-looking Polish Prince, as I had seen him then—faultlessly attired—with his expression of sadness and intellectual weariness—who had paid me the compliment of falling in love with me on the spot, when I was only nineteen years old—an inexperienced country girl, in a plain white dress, with only a natural flower in my hair. "Marriage, affection" (he had said) had not entered into the programme of his existence; till then all

women had seemed to him "like dolls." He was the votary of mysticism—a student of occult science. How strong, therefore, must have been the affection, the admiration, the regard, which could cause such a man to change the whole plan of his life for me! How little of that love (I was fully aware of this now) had I ever given him back—even in the days which preceded all knowledge of what had now estranged me from him for ever! I had always kept, as it were, a watch over my heart, lest it should make the supreme surrender. Was I keeping it (I now asked myself, bitterly) for this cruel, ungrateful man, who was making me suffer? He had spoken words of love to me—looking upon me, no doubt, as an easy victim—during a midnight drive in a sledge, just to make the time pass agreeably and to play at sentiment; and now here was I—arrayed with so much trouble to seem pleasing in his eyes—slighted and humiliated by him in public; for surely, being almost in the position of his hostess for the evening, it was his duty, even supposing that he had hated me, to address to me a few words out of common politeness.

"Poor Hugo!" I murmured, half aloud, tears coming to my eyes, "it was ungrateful of me not to care for you more, before I knew—before everything! You are gone now, you are changed; I can never make you any reparation, but you are avenged, you are avenged! I am as lonely, as forsaken, as unloved as you are!"

For an instant my heart seemed to go forth to my husband in tenderness, compassion, and remorse. Then a wind, cold as a blast from an iceberg, passed over my bare shoulders, and Hugo's image appeared before me in the glass—the Hugo of to-day, not the good-looking, carefully attired Prince, of Ingleby Grange—standing spectral and Druid-like at my elbow, wrapped in the long white shroud of the Sabean star-worshippers, who have done for ever with the world and the flesh. He seemed to gaze

at me earnestly with his hollow luminous eyes,—I saw stains of blood upon his grizzled beard,—the beard that had changed him into another man,—then the form faded away from the looking-glass, and I saw in its place a white domino, capering across it, with a little flower-girl, all decked out with roses and crimson ribands. These figures no doubt, flitting thus, before eyes that were swimming with tears, had suggested that ghastly apparition. But it was as well, I said to myself, bitterly, that I should be reminded of its existence! My disordered imagination had not evoked it one second too soon, for to what wickedness and vanity was I not falling a prey! Tricked out in jewels and finery, I was assisting at a gorgeous pageant, and making comparisons, in my folly, between the sentiments of two different men, as though they were both my aspiring suitors; to one of these I had been married once, from both of them I was divided, now, by insurmountable obstacles. How could it signify to me what their feelings for me might be? One of them was as dead to me, now, as though he had never existed at all, and yet, because of him, the other must be rooted out of my heart and become dead to me too, and I, miserable, deluded woman that I was, what business had I to breathe the same air, and clothe myself in the same sort of raiment as happy, careless people? Ought I not, rather, to cover myself with sackcloth and ashes; to assume, like my unfortunate husband, the dress of one who has abjured for ever the joys and sorrows of mortality?

After giving way to these gloomy reflections, I went towards where most of the dancers were congregated, feeling somewhat calmed and chastened in spirit, reproved, as it were, from On High, for my presumptuous folly.

CHAPTER XLII.

But alas, how fleeting, how futile, are the wisest resolutions of woman! And what a strange, perverse, incomprehensible creature man is, also, even at his best!

Now, when I stood listlessly looking on at the dancers, feeling like

> "A phantom among men—companionless
> As the last cloud of an expiring storm;"

when I had made up my mind that I ought to go about—like the Sabean fanatics—wrapped up in a winding-sheet; when my heart had beaten and battered itself into a state of numb resignation; and when the gaiety, and enjoyment, and interest, seemed to have been entirely banished from the evening's entertainment, I turned to find that Courtenay Davenant—the man who had been the cause of all my misery—was standing at my side, wearing an expression which told me that he was utterly unconscious of having offended.

"You have been enjoying yourself, Miss Collingwood, I hope?" he said, looking down at me kindly, but *only* kindly, as I thought. "You must be very pleased with the way in which everything has gone off. It has been a great success."

I could scarcely trust myself to reply to such trivial words, but managed at last to murmur something equally common-place. Then he asked me if he might "have the honour of a dance—this valse, perhaps?"

It would be useless for me to attempt to describe here the revulsion of feeling which followed upon this simple request; the effect produced upon me by the intoxicating strains of the music—transformed now into what seemed liked the music of the spheres; or to dwell upon the many mingling emotions which combined to make up a total of

absolute enchantment, when I found myself once more in the presence of the being I so unwisely loved. Since this time, of which I am writing, I have thought much and read much. I fancy that I must certainly have grown a good deal wiser; that I ought to have become more cultured and philosophical. And yet, the result of all my thinking, my reading, my worldly experience, has been to lead me to conclusions which many will regard as lawless and reprehensible. I have fallen in with so many hapless human beings—though often ignorant altogether of their misfortune, and fenced round with shields of self-complacency—who have never experienced, who never could be brought to experience, the divine mystery of love in its highest, or even in its *lowest*, sense—that I have come to esteem what is so rare, so inexpressibly difficult to realise in all its intensity, as something supreme and excellent indeed—come whensoever it may—be it wisely or unwisely enjoyed—and those few to whom the revelation has been vouchsafed as beings in the highest degree favoured and privileged.

I could not tell, of course, whether Courtenay perceived how changed everything had suddenly become for me. He spoke little, and merely in formal and conventional phrases. But I was thinking of what he had said to me on our way home from the gipsy-camp, and striving to detect in his voice some echo of those passionate words. He led the way from the ball-room towards one of the less frequented apartments as soon as our valse was over. I made up my mind that he was about to allude to the ill-natured stories he had heard concerning me, and that this would give me an opportunity of contradicting them. My heart began beating very fast as I wondered how I should be able to do this. Perhaps, I thought, it might be better to put an end to all these concealments and mystifications at once, by revealing myself to him then and there, and saying simply—

"I am your cousin Nelly, the poor girl you ignored and neglected in the old days. The English Ambassador—our host, my godfather, my dead parents' old friend—has taken compassion upon my orphaned state, and treats me like a daughter. This is how it happens that I am here, and that, by a series of strange coincidences, we meet at last! But I am the wife, now, of another man. My husband is shut up, and supposed to be mad; but his madness cannot give me my freedom. It is too late, therefore, now, to think of carrying out our family marriage project!"

Something of this kind I would endeavour to say, if only I could muster the necessary courage. But before this imaginary explanation could take place, we came upon Lord Silchester in the corridor. He was walking with some Russian officers in imposing uniforms, their breasts glittering with decorations.

I was struck, the moment I saw him, with the expression of his countenance. He looked pale, agitated, fatigued; older by several years, as I fancied, than when I had seen him only a little while ago.

By a familiar gesture he signified that he had something to say to me. I left Courtenay's arm, and went to him at once. "I have been looking for you, Helen," he said, in a hurried undertone, "to warn you that some ill-advised and foolish people are going about, disguised in masks and dominos, saying all sorts of unpleasant and impertinent things to whoever will listen to them. It is difficult to prevent these follies at masked balls, but I trust they won't venture to endeavour to annoy *you*. If they should, pass on, and take no notice of them. Above all, don't be tempted to bandy words with them!"

I was relieved to think that this was all that he had to say to me. From his face, I had almost expected to hear of the discovery of some new plot to assassinate the

Emperor. "There is nothing worse than this?" I inquired; "no bad news? You are not feeling ill?"

"No, no," he answered, with what I fancied was rather a forced smile, "the supper-room was rather hot and crowded. I felt it a little oppressive, but I am all right now," and he went on towards the entrance to the ball-room.

I rejoined my partner, and we turned together into an ante-room which had been fitted up as a tea-room. It was beautifully decorated with flowers, and lit with shaded candles. A door at the further end of it communicated with the ball-room, through which we could perceive in the distance the gorgeous and grotesque figures of the dancers. There were but few people in this apartment when we entered it, mere birds of passage, making their way, tricked out in their gay plumage, to the ball-room. We sat down together upon a low divan which was almost screened by the door at which we had entered.

"Lord Silchester is looking dreadfully pale and tired," I remarked, merely for the sake of saying something.

"I didn't notice that he looked paler than usual," answered my companion. "No doubt, however, I did not observe him as attentively as you did. He is your uncle, I believe?" he added suddenly, looking into my face with what I thought was quite an inquisitorial expression.

"No, he is not my uncle," I replied, hesitatingly, for I was thinking of the revelation of kinship which I was about to make to him, and was anxious not to forestall it.

"I fancied," returned Courtenay, "that I had heard that he was either your uncle or some very near relation?"

He spoke, I thought, very coldly and carelessly—but

then I was still dwelling, in imagination, upon the tender words he had spoken in the sledge.

"Lord Silchester is the dearest and kindest friend that remains to me in the world," I replied. "He has known me for years, but we are not related to each other."

"I thought not," said Courtenay, still preserving the same hard and indifferent manner. "It is evident, however, that he takes the greatest possible interest in you."

I looked into my companion's dark eyes inquiringly, feeling an irrepressible chill at my heart. What new form of torture was this? Was this the man with whom I had driven through the snow-bound moonlit forests only a few nights ago, and who had seemed, then, to be so overflowing with sympathy, and tenderness, and respectful consideration?

But before I had time to proceed further with these reflections, my attention was suddenly arrested by the sight of two female figures, who, without apparently perceiving us in our sequestered nook, had glided past us to the tea-table. They were standing there now, with their backs towards us, two tall, graceful-looking women, dressed, both exactly alike, in long, flowing, yellow dominos and black satin masks, and each one carrying a large bunch of drooping mimosa. The taller of the two asked for a cup either of tea or coffee. As she lifted the lace which fell over the lower part of her mask in order to partake of it, she turned towards the place where we were seated. I obtained, thus, a glimpse of her mouth. Not a small mouth by any means, looked at thus, apart from the rest of her face, but a well cut one, with red lips and small regular teeth. This mouth was the only feature I could perceive. Hardly a sufficient proof as to the identity of one who, in other respects, was so completely disguised, still less as to that of a person whom I

had never beheld in my life! But, as she lifted up the trimming of her black mask, I had seen something more than her mouth. I had seen her earrings—two large pear-shaped drops of polished emerald, hanging from tops formed of the same stone, cut into squares, and surrounded by diamonds; earrings that looked as though they might have been the twin offspring of that larger emerald ornament, identical as regarded form and setting, which, through a strange combination of tragic circumstances, had passed, some time ago, into my own possession, the magnificent but detested Crecszoleski family jewel, with its terrible associations, which was lying, hidden away from human sight, in the secret drawer of my dressing-case in this very house.

"Who is that lady?" I gasped, turning to Courtenay Davenant. Something in my manner, I suppose, made him look at me as in anxious astonishment.

But before he could answer me, the yellow domino had glided up to my side. Instinctively I shrank closer to Courtenay as she approached, conscious to my very finger-tips of the vicinity of something evil and unfriendly. Her companion, in the meantime, had walked to the door of the ball-room, where she stood as though in wrapt contemplation of the dancers. "You would wish to know who I am?" inquired the weird yellow figure before me, speaking in English with a hardly perceptible foreign accent. "Do you suppose that I have come here, wearing this dress, to answer you that question? But I will tell you, instead, who and what you are yourself, for I am acquainted with your family history! You, seated there, *coiffée à la Madonne*, but crowned with the diamonds that are the last gift of your lover, *you*, also, are wearing a mask!"

She then called me by a shameful and infamous name; coming quite close to me, and hissing the word in my ear, as though she had been a venomous serpent.

Courtenay Davenant started to his feet, and made as though he were about to lay hands on her; but she glided away from him towards where her companion was standing, exclaiming as she went, with a gesture of denunciation,—

"Yes! I unmask you; you who are posing here as an innocent '*ingénue*.' I denounce you, and proclaim what in reality you are—the mistress of the English Ambassador; a position which, let me inform you, was honourably filled by your respectable mother before you!"

I rose from my seat terrified and bewildered. Courtenay's face was as white as that of a corpse.

"Who is that woman?" he asked—"that creature who has dared to insult you in my presence? Let me go and tear the mask from her face."

"No, no!" I implored, "I know her! I will go to her alone, and ask her to explain her words. Do not go near her."

"You know her?" he asked in astonishment. "Does she then, really, know anything of your history?"

"Nothing whatever. All she said came from jealousy and malice. She is a very bad woman—cruel and malignant; what can have induced her to come here?"

"Surely you have kept a list of the people who were invited?"

"Yes; and her name was not amongst them. Probably she has taken some other name; I can account, now, for Lord Silchester's unhappy look. He must have known that she was here."

"And you would like to speak to him about her, no doubt?" suggested Courtenay, kindly but coldly; let me take you to him before this woman has had time to make her escape."

I told him that this could do no good; that I would rather, first of all, speak to her alone. He looked at me with an expression of anxiety and bewilderment.

"I can make nothing of all this," he exclaimed, at length, in a hopeless tone. "Why not let me go and order the creature out of the house, as she was not invited? Why do you seem afraid that I should speak to her? What can she say worse—more terrible—than what she has said already? I pray Heaven that there is no truth in it!"

He looked at me earnestly, beseechingly, but I felt too much agitated to reply. I was striving to understand what some of those terrible words could possibly mean. The first part of the malignant speech hurled at me by Delphine Dobrowolska from under her black mask (for I could not doubt but that the yellow apparition was she), in all ignorance of my relationship to her unfortunate brother, had merely confirmed me in a suspicion which had lain dormant for some months in my mind. I was convinced, now, that Lord Silchester ("George Collingwood," as he was at that time) was the "Englishman in a good position" with whom the Countess had fallen in love—after some strange, tigress fashion—years ago, in Paris. I recalled the scrap of paper—evidently a part of one of her letters—upon which my godfather had written down Hugo's name at Ingleby Grange; the name that, as he had expressed it, "sounded like the crackling of a bag of biscuits." In this letter she had entreated the good offices of her former admirer for her "*cher frère Hugo;*" and hence it had arisen, no doubt, that George Collingwood had invited the Polish Prince to his father's country house. Later on she had proposed visiting it herself; but he had declined (as I had good cause to remember) to fall in with her views, pleading, by way of excuse, the precarious state of the old lord's health. It was apparent to me from this, as well as from several words which my godfather had let fall in my presence, that, whatever might have been his relations with Madame Dobrowolska in the past, he had had no desire whatever to renew them

in the present. I could conceive nothing more wounding and humiliating to a woman, such as I imagined her to be, than this evident indifference upon the part of the man she had striven so hard to enthral. One would have fancied that—all things considered—St. Petersburg would have been the very last place in which she would have ventured to present herself; but, to a person so reckless and unscrupulous, there may have lurked an additional charm in the notion that her sojourn would not be unattended by danger. She had come, I doubted not, as I had come myself, with the intention of visiting Hugo. She had found the man who had seemed to scorn her repeated advances established here as English Ambassador. What more likely than that—taking advantage of the facilities for disguise afforded by this "*bal masqué et costumé*"—she should seek his presence once more, if only to give vent to the bitterness and malice which animated her heart? She had discovered that I, a young woman not related to the Ambassador by any tie of kinship (this she would have had every opportunity of learning through Celestine Vigon, her creature and accomplice), was living here as a member of his household. Mason's involuntary indiscretion, together with my costume as "Night," and my emblematical *bouquet*—the very one she had seen displayed in the florist's window, would have enabled her to identify me at once, even supposing that I had not been occupying the prominent position of hostess. Celestine Vigon was at her elbow, too, to trace any resemblance that I might still bear to the little child she had once known; for I felt sure that the other yellow figure could be no one else but the Frenchwoman, dressed exactly like her mistress, with the view of increasing our mystification. It was not wonderful, then (I said to myself), that Delphine Dobrowolska—poor Hugo's evil genius, who had once imagined herself to be in love with the Ambassador—should desire now to insult and wound me. Perhaps,

as there were so many mischief-makers about, she might even have believed that I deserved the guilty and shameful name which she had just hissed at me in her impotent rage. But what had my poor mother—that blameless and beautiful angel, invoked by me whenever I had felt most the need of pure and spiritual consolation—to do with all this complication of envy, hatred, and malice? These thoughts, which have taken some time to set down in writing, passed through my mind very quickly, before, indeed, I had reached the ball-room, where the two yellow-clad women were now standing. By-and-by Courtenay Davenant's voice broke in upon my musings.

"Miss Collingwood," he said, gently, "may I, without seeming impertinent, ask you one question?"

I answered that he might ask me as many as he liked.

"Were those diamonds — the beautiful stars you are wearing in your hair, and which, I hear, only arrived from England this morning, by the messenger—really given to you by Lord Silchester?"

"He wished to give them to me," I answered, "but though he is such a dear old friend, I did not like to accept a present of so much value from him. They are family diamonds, besides; so I told him I would rather only wear them for this evening."

"They are only lent to you, then, to wear with your fancy dress?"

"They are only lent to me," I repeated.

"Then let us go together, and tell that black-masked, black-hearted woman that she lied in her teeth!"

"No, no!" I implored—not knowing what slanderous words he might not hear, aimed at the one whose memory had always been so sacred to me.

He looked at me sadly and reproachfully, and then exclaimed vehemently:

"I wish to Heaven that I could see a way out of all these mysteries, and disguises! I implore you to be, at

least, open with me; to tell me the truth about yourself and your position. Forgive me if I speak as one having authority. I care for you, Helen; this is my excuse. I have looked up to you as something pure, and good, and beautiful, so far above me in every way; the perfect woman I have dreamed of for years; but if I thought that the horrid thing I have just heard was true I would endeavour never to look upon your face again as long as I lived. It would remind me too painfully of an illusion destroyed, of an awakening from a delightful dream to a most miserable reality!"

"I will tell you everything," I answered, "all my unhappy history,—much that will shock and surprise you. I will make no concealments, but it must be to-morrow, not now. I must speak again with that woman before she leaves the house, and I must see her alone."

"What time may I come to-morrow?" he asked.

He looked pale, haggard, and miserable, almost like one who could have no more joy in life. But for those last mysterious words hissed at me by the tongue of the yellow serpent, I might, perhaps, have derived some manner of consolation from this proof that Courtenay was not, really, the callous, insensible creature I had deemed him. As it was, however, I was absorbed by one idea, a growing dread, a ghastly suspicion, which I hated myself for nourishing, even for a moment. I dreaded that there might lurk, in the Countess's terrible words, some particle of truth, and I was in terror lest she should escape me before I could confront her again. Then my mind became confused with all sorts of desperate projects by which I hoped to compel her to retract her malignant accusations.

"Tell me what time I may come to you?" Courtenay asked once more, in a voice from which all hope seemed to have departed.

I told him that if he would come to our sitting-room at

about three o'clock upon the following afternoon, I would endeavour, if possible, to see him alone, and that I would then tell him my story, without making any concealments.

"Upon the stroke of three," he answered, "I will be there."

CHAPTER XLIII.

A MOMENT afterwards I was standing opposite to the woman whom I have called the yellow serpent, and she was smiling at me and mocking me underneath the lace frill of her black satin mask. The second serpent was at her side, but I could distinguish between the two in spite of their being dressed alike, and I went straight up to the woman wearing the emerald carrings.

"I do not want you, Celestine Vigon!" I said, thrusting her aside; "I wish to speak to Madame Dobrowolska alone!"

Because of their masks I could not see upon their faces the effect of my words, but they both started simultaneously, and the one I had addressed as "Celestine Vigon" slunk back into the crowd.

I felt reckless, defiant, and utterly without fear. I was inspired, as it seemed to me, with a high and sacred mission. My dead mother's honour was at stake, and I was prepared to dare everything in order to vindicate it. I exerted all my "volitional power," to use Hugo's favourite term, to combat and counteract this other will, formidable though I knew it to be, which was at work now within only a few inches of me, shrouded in the long folds of the ghastly yellow domino. I half feared that

when I began to speak my emotion—my intense exaltation —might prevent my words from being audible. I strove, however, by a desperate effort, to school my voice so that it should not tremble, and said as calmly as I could,

"Madame Dobrowolska, I desire to speak to you with reference to the language which you used just now about my mother. I pass over your insults to myself, the result, no doubt, of your ignorance of true facts. What you said of *her*, however, was a malicious lie!"

As I paused, overcome by emotion, I heard her laughing softly underneath her mask.

"Ah! this is real melodrama!" she sneered. "You can make a fortune upon the stage, mademoiselle, when all other specuations fail! What fire! What energy! What virtuous English indignation! And by what new name do you address me, too, for some dramatic purpose! 'Dobrowolska?' Who is Madame Dobrowolska? Well! I am sorry to be obliged by you to repeat my unpleasant home-truths! George Collingwood, our noble host of to-night, was your mother's favoured lover once, as I am assured that he is yours at the present time!"

"It is a lie!" I gasped. "A wicked, malicious lie!"

The room seemed to be reeling and swaying before my eyes; but I was striving hard to be calm. I knew that any show of emotion upon my part, unmasked as I was, must attract attention.

"If you will not believe my words I can produce for you other proofs," the yellow demon said softly. "I have them here in this room for your inspection. Would you like to look at them?"

"Yes," I answered, sternly, my tongue cleaving to the roof of my mouth, and my heart beating so fast that I could scarcely breathe. I tried to say more, but found that I had completely lost my voice. By-and-by, I managed to get out the words,

"Show me your proofs, then."

She flitted across the room to where her accomplice was standing, and I saw the two women whispering together.

Miss Warden, who, arrayed as a duenna, had been watching me in astonishment, now came to me for an explanation of my strange conduct. I had only time to tell her that I had discovered that the Prince's sister was here—that she had insulted me—but that I could hold my own, and desired now to settle a private matter with her. I begged Miss Warden not to interrupt me, therefore, but to remain where I could see her, and beckon to her, in case I required her. I told her that I intended going with Madame Dobrowolska into one of the small rooms opening upon the corridor in order that we might not be remarked.

"But you are as white as a sheet, Helen," she said. "Any one would see that something is agitating you. I shall go and fetch one of those spare dominos from the cloak-room and you can then put it on and be hidden from observation."

She went off to act upon this excellent suggestion, and in another instant the Countess was again at my side. She was holding a small packet in her hand.

"Are you acquainted with the writing of your mother, Lady Davenant?" she inquired in a voice of mock courtesy. "I have here three letters written by her to our noble and respectable host in the days when he was neither so noble nor so respectable. Would you like to look at them?"

By this time I had become a good deal calmer.

"Yes, I will look at them," I answered; "but not here. Be good enough to come with me into one of the empty rooms in the passage. Your letters are probably forgeries."

I spoke defiantly, but my heart was filled with misgivings. I felt that I might be about to experience some form of bitter disillusion.

"Come, then," said the Countess, imperiously, and we quitted the ball-room together.

In the passage I met Miss Warden with the domino. I slipped it on in the first empty room we came to, and tied the black, bat-like mask over my face.

"Now we are upon equal terms!" I said, as I motioned my companion to a chair, and sat down opposite to her.

"Upon equal terms!" she repeated, laughing scornfully. "Ah, girl, you know little of the one you are braving if you venture to speak thus! Were I to exert my will at this moment, which this evening is stronger than it has ever been before, I could compel you to kneel down now upon the *parquet* and grovel at my feet! But to what purpose? It would be only waste of time!"

She thrust out one of her feet as she spoke, a very small foot for so tall a woman, shod with a pointed yellow slipper, to match the colour of her domino.

"You are right!" I exclaimed, forcing a scornful laugh too. "It would be only waste of time! I know all about your 'will,' your 'volitional power,' your magnetic influence over weak and helpless natures, but I do not fear you! *I*, too, am possessed of will, of magnetism. If I cannot dominate you, at least I can resist and defy you!"

Now that my face was covered I was enabled thus to assume a tone of bravado. As I have already said, I felt no fear of this woman or of her pretended powers, and I knew that, in the presence of hard and merciless natures, no sign of nervousness or apprehension has ever stood anybody in good stead. It is only those who are sensitive and emotional themselves that can make allowance for the falterings and misgivings of others.

I was unable, of course, to perceive the effect of my words. She did not reply to them, but only said quietly:

"Well, here are the letters. You can look at them one at a time. It will be best to read them according to the dates. You will observe that, although the addresses are perfectly distinct, and also in Lady Davenant's writing, the letters have never passed through the post. This is the only mysterious part of it; she must have forgotten to send them. The rest is all quite plain."

With this she handed me the first letter, which I took mechanically, my heart swelling with conflicting emotions.

It was enclosed in a small, slender envelope, such as were generally used some years ago, with one of the old-fashioned red postage-stamps in the corner. It was sealed with a little red seal, which, however, had been broken in the opening.

I examined the envelope and its direction with the greatest attention, holding it close up to the little oblique eyes of my black mask:—

"*To the Honourable George Collingwood*," and then followed the name of his father's place, and of our nearest post-town.

Alas, there could be no doubt whatever as to the handwriting! It was the writing upon which I had taken such pains to form my own, resembling, too, in every respect, that of the letter which had been numbered for so long amongst my dearest treasures, — the letter which my mother had written to Mason, then my nurse, when I was quite a baby!

Now that I was indeed sure that the writing was my mother's I felt that it would be little short of sacrilege were I to read the words which had never been intended for prying eyes. The woman at my side had read them, it was true; through some combination of treachery and cunning, the letters had fallen into her cruel hands; but my poor dead mother, could she have been consulted, would surely have preferred that any rash words which she might once have written should be read by

her bitterest enemy rather than by the child she had so dearly loved.

As I held the letter thus in my hand an inspiration came to me. It was almost as though a voice, the voice of that one who had been lost to me for so long, was whispering imploringly in my ear:

"The letters are for George Collingwood. He has never yet received them. They should be read by no other eyes!"

Then the woman at my side spoke, too; she was becoming impatient.

"Remember," she said, "the letter is not yours. You are to return it to me. I hold the others till you give me back this one, and it is the last of the three that is the worst!"

"I shall not read them!" was all that I could find the voice to answer. I was thinking profoundly. I had decided that I must obtain possession of these letters at all hazards. How was I to attain this end?

By-and-by an idea occurred to me. Outside in the passage I caught sight of two figures—the "duenna" and the other yellow domino. Our respective accomplices (if I may apply this equivocal term to so old and estimable a friend as Miss Warden) were hovering about close to the doorway, like two "seconds," anxiously watching lest their "principals" should transgress any of the established rules of single combat.

I beckoned to the duenna, and she came at once to my side. I whispered my instructions, and she left me to carry them out. I had desired her to fetch me something from my bed-room, which, fortunately, was upon this same floor, shut off, with our sitting-room, from the passage, by a small vestibule, the door of which we had locked, seeing that there were so many strangers about. She knew, however, where to find the key.

"You are wishing to revenge yourself upon me in some

way?" asked the yellow domino scoffingly. "You are sending for George Collingwood, for your lover, to warn him who is amongst his guests? I can assure you that you are merely losing your time! You do not know me, though you pretend to do so! *He*, on the contrary, has seen and recognised me. We have had some agreeable conversation together about past times!"

I took no heed of what she was saying. I was developing my plan of action, praying and hoping for the firmness and courage necessary to carry it out, and for victory, in the end, over my merciless adversary.

I had no doubt, now, but that these were the three letters abstracted by Celestine Vigon during my mother's lifetime, and about which she had afterwards written to Sir Harry, demanding fifty pounds as the price of their restitution. Sir Harry had evidently dismissed this attempt at extortion with contempt, and I could but feel thankful now to think that the letters had never fallen into his hands. Still, they should remain no longer in the possession of these two unscrupulous women. Somehow, I must obtain them at once, and I had just thought of a method by which I hoped to succeed in doing this.

"Had you not better begin to read?" said the Countess impatiently. "Soon I shall have to go. It is later than I had meant to stay. Read the last one, in which she calls him her 'own George.' 'I will share you' (she goes on) 'with no one! I must be the first in your existence, and all joy in life would end for me should I lose you. With *you*, I fear it is different. I often picture you to myself smiling and happy, even dancing at a ball, perhaps, when I am dead and gone from you for ever!' You see that Lady Davenant (that respectable British matron!) was at times quite prophetic! After reading you will not say that the letters are forgeries!"

I was almost glad that she had mentioned the word "forgeries." The envelopes were certainly addressed by

my mother's hand, but how could I tell, without looking, whether their contents were genuine? I took the letter I held out of its cover, and without unfolding it, examined the writing of the few words thus presented to my view. The writing was the same as that upon the outside of the envelope. I returned it to the Countess, since she would not give them all to me at once, and examined the two others in the same way. There was no doubt as to the authenticity of the writing, though, from the little I saw of it, I could not have known whether the letters were compromising ones or not. In the last, I caught sight of the printed address "Northover Park" upon the writing-paper.

Madame Dobrowolska seemed mortified because I had not read more. She had re-possessed herself of them, and was shuffling them up and down in her hands as though they had been playing-cards.

Miss Warden came up to me at this moment, and slipped a small packet into my hand. I hoped that I now held in my grasp something that my adversary would wish for as eagerly as I wished for the letters, and that, if I could only retain my coolness and presence of mind, I might effect an exchange. Miss Warden retired to the passage. We were alone together once more. I assumed, beneath my mask, a manner of complete indifference.

"I do not see why we should be made responsible for the failings of our relations," I said quietly. "Somebody has said, somewhere, that we cannot reform our forefathers. Besides which, it is not always the guiltiest person who is discovered and unmasked! *You* must know this, Madame Dobrowolska, you, who are free to come here to-night, whilst your unfortunate brother is deprived of his liberty for life! Whose are the hands that are really stained with blood?"

I had commenced speaking in a careless voice, but I had increased in vehemence as I proceeded. I felt that I

uttered these last words in quite a denunciatory tone. My cheeks were burning as though with fever, and my heart was beating violently. I felt valiant, indignant, inspired—every nerve and fibre of my being was concentrated for the achievement of my object. The yellow figure in front of me seemed to have turned suddenly into stone. She neither spoke nor moved, but sat perfectly quiet, looking at me, I suppose, through the little eyes of her mask.

Now that I was fairly roused, words came to me easily enough. My difficulty was, indeed, to prevent them from coming too fast.

"Pitiless, merciless woman!" I exclaimed; "you came here to-night only to taunt and humiliate me — to give pain and suffering to one who has never injured you! You have endeavoured to cast a slur upon the name of my mother, who, if you ever regarded her as a rival, is dead now, and removed for ever from your path. A generous woman would have left her memory in peace. But you have neither generosity nor mercy. You have never possessed a ray of human pity. Had you any for your second husband—the rich Jew, whom you married out of pique and self-interest—when you stood over him in that gloomy subterranean vault where he was done to death? Who was it who tore from his neck the talisman which you fancied might have protected him from his murderers? When your brother's hand faltered, who was it who encouraged him to achieve the horrid deed? Helpless under your malign influence, like a puppet in your cruel hands—poor Hugo, your victim also, the man upon whose superstition and susceptibility you have ever wrought with such fatal effect, struck as one might strike in a dream, incited by you—by your imaginary grievances against your husband! Where is he now—this brother whom you pretended to love; whose affection, whose fortune, you have used for your own selfish purposes? Have you had mercy upon him—upon anybody? Why, then, should I spare your feelings now, I

who know all the particulars of your many crimes? Here! look at what I hold in my hand! Of what ghastly horrors would this not tell if it could find voice to speak! Examine it well, Delphine Crecszoleski—Countess Dobrowolska—Madame Bernard!—I hardly know by which of your many 'aliases' I ought to address you! Does not this ornament bring back to your memory the face of the dead man whose body you helped to bury in those secret vaults, in order, as you thought, the better to conceal all traces of your crime? Look! it matches the earrings you are wearing at this very moment!" and I held towards her the large emerald and diamond pendant—the Creczoleski family jewel, of which I had become possessed through so strange and sinister a combination of events.

She snatched at it convulsively, but I retained my hold. I noticed that her fingers trembled.

"Give it to me! You must have stolen it! It was the gift of my mother! I will have possession of my own property!" she gasped, all in a breath.

"No, no!" I rejoined quietly, tightening my hold upon the hated thing; "there is no question of stealing! This is mine now, but it shall be yours upon certain conditions. I will give it up to you for those three letters."

As far as I could judge by the voice in which she replied, my words had come as a relief to her.

"Do not think that I am in fear of you, girl," she said, apologetically, "because my hands are trembling with emotion; but my mother's favourite ornament, the marriage-gift of my father — the object I valued more than any other I possessed! It is the unexpected sight of this that has overcome me!"

Another moment, and I had achieved my purpose. The three letters were safe in my possession, and I had handed over the emerald pendant to its former owner. She laughed softly as her fingers closed upon it.

"Ah! now I am once more myself!" she exclaimed.

"You were not aware, probably—you who have been speaking just now of talismans—that this jewel is one. That is why I would not have lost it for the world! It was only because you were holding it, that you were able for a moment to exert your will against mine! Poor little fool! You imagined that you were intimidating me!"

"I am myself again, also," I answered, with assumed calmness. "I care nothing at all about your will—your powers of dominion; all I must advise you is, to go and exercise them elsewhere! Leave this house now, which decency, discretion, good taste, should have forbidden you to enter, and take with you that other wicked woman—Celestine Vigon, your servant and accomplice, the woman you employed to act as a spy in my mother's house, and who, I have good reason to suspect, at your cruel instigation, had some hand in her death!"

I rose from my chair as I finished speaking, and went out into the passage where Miss Warden and Celestine Vigon were standing.

"You had better leave this house, at once, Celestine," I said, going straight up to the masked figure. "Neither you nor Madame Dobrowolska ought ever to have entered it. Persuade her, now, to go quietly away before she is recognised. It is known to more than one person that she is here, and she may be arrested at any moment."

Without replying, she glided past me, and rejoined her mistress in the room I had just quitted.

I now begged Miss Warden to make my excuses to the Ambassador if he should enquire after me, and to say that fatigue had obliged me to retire before the end of the ball; and with the three letters tightly grasped in my hand, I sought the solitude of my own chamber, feeling, now that my excitement had somewhat subsided, utterly broken down and exhausted both in mind and in body.

I have often wondered since, how it happened that I was enabled to say and do what I did; by what unseen

force I was supported and inspired to act a part which was so foreign to my nature. I cannot bring myself to believe, of course, that the emerald pendant was really a talisman. Upon suddenly beholding it in my hand Madame Dobrowolska had, for an instant, lost her presence of mind. By this I had profited, and anxious that I should not attribute her emotion to fear, it had occurred to her, no doubt, to invest the family jewel with supernatural powers.

Without attaching any importance to her words, however, I must admit that, whilst holding the pendant in my hand, I was confirmed and strengthened in my previous abhorrence of this woman and her crimes. The sight of it brought back to me with painful force the impressions of misery and horror with which I had listened at Nice to the terrible revelations of Mrs. Marks; and the ghastly scenes which had been enacted in the vaults of the Polish *château* presented themselves so vividly to my imagination that I felt impelled to refer to them and to assume a tone of vehement denunciation.

It was nearly three o'clock by my watch when I entered my bedroom. I took off my dress, my veil, my crown of glittering stars. The morning was here; I had done with night and her emblems! My *bouquet* was drooping and faded. I put it in water for conscience sake, although I knew that as the violets were mounted upon wire they would never revive. I felt as limp, as lifeless, as hopeless of revival, as those withering flowers, but in spite of my fatigue I decided that it would be a mockery to go to bed. I knew that after the disturbing events of the evening it would not be possible to sleep, and I resolved, whilst awaiting the daylight, to think over all that had occurred, and consider my plans for the future.

CHAPTER XLIV.

As I sat musing in my solitude I dared not read the letters which were lying under my hand, fearing lest they might go towards proving the truth of Madame Dobrowolska's malignant assertions. I set myself, however, to recall the events which had followed upon my mother's death. Alas, every circumstance appeared calculated to confirm my newly aroused suspicions!

I remembered, as though it had been but yesterday, the afternoon of her death, and how,—ignorant of the news that awaited them,—my father, the hale and hearty Sir Harry Davenant of those days, and George Collingwood, his friend and neighbour, had ridden back from the hunting-field together like two brothers, so close and cordial had seemed their good fellowship.

I remembered, too, the sense of mystery and misfortune which had oppressed my infant mind, the awed consciousness that something altogether unusual and important was taking place, whilst I had waited, frightened and wondering, in the passage within sight of my mother's bedroom door. Then I had heard my father's voice, sounding hoarse and unfamiliar, as though half-choked with emotion:

"Leave me alone with her, George" (how well I remembered his words!) "I feel that I can bear it now!" and George Collingwood, the highly-placed diplomatist of to-day, had staggered out into the passage, looking dazed and miserable. Why had he caught me up in his arms as he came upon me standing there, and kissed me so tenderly and despairingly, and why were my cheeks afterwards all wet with his tears? Because,—everything seemed quite plain to me now,—he had loved the woman who had just passed away, the wife of the friend who

trusted and believed in him, and because I was her child, the only part of her that now remained to him on earth!

My father and George Collingwood had ridden home together from hunting on that fatal day, as I have already said, and, to judge by appearances, they were then upon terms of the most cordial friendship. Together they had walked up the steps leading to the front door, and they had gone together, as though from a desire for mutual sympathy and support, into the very chamber of death. But had they ever met again after that day? My father had quitted Northover almost immediately, it is true, and George Collingwood's diplomatic career had necessitated his living a great deal abroad. Still there must have been occasions when these two men, seeming once such close friends and comrades, must have found themselves again within only a few miles of one another; what more natural than that they should have foregathered and talked together over old times?

And yet I could not remember that George Collingwood had ever set foot in Northover House since my poor mother's death. Nay, as I went on reviving my earliest recollections thus, it even seemed to me that he must have been bound by some vow or promise to abstain from doing so. Two or three circumstances, mere trifles in themselves, occurred suddenly to my remembrance.

When, after my childish days were over and done with, and Miss Warden and I were leading a monotonous, though by no means an unhappy, existence, at my old home, why had not my parents' former friend ever paid me a visit upon some of the many occasions when he was staying with his father in our immediate neighbourhood? This omission was, evidently, neither the result of forgetfulness nor indifference, for when I had fallen in with him that day, when riding upon the high road, his eyes had brightened with pleasure at sight of me, and he had at once made arrangements with me for a second meeting.

Why, however, did he not call openly for me at the house and take me for a ride? and why, upon both of these two occasions, had he separated from me, as though with regret, at the lodge-gate of Northover Park, when, by accompanying me all the way to my home, he might have prolonged our ride and returned to his own by a much shorter and prettier way?

Then I remembered how, upon the occasion of Hugo Crecszoleski's first visit to us, whilst anxious apparently that the Prince should not see me *en tête-à-tête*, my godfather had not accompanied his guest, explaining, in his letter to Miss Warden, that he had an appointment at the Foreign Office which would oblige him to go to London. As it turned out, however, this must have been merely an excuse. He had walked with the Prince, in order to show him the way, as far as the entrance to Northover Park. Why had he not accompanied him to the house?

We had fancied at the time that, having from some cause put off his journey to town, he had felt bound, all the same, to adhere to what he had written, but in the light of all the later knowledge that had come to me, I perceived that he would never have treated us with so much formality, and I was enabled to put quite a different construction upon his conduct. Then I recalled my father's strange behaviour; the extraordinary change which had taken place in him; his apparent horror of everything that could remind him of his dead wife, and his coldness and want of affection towards her child. All this, I fancied, could be very easily explained now. Deceived by the woman he had so tenderly loved, dishonoured by the friend he had so thoroughly trusted, his nature had become soured and embittered. Habits of intemperance, resorted to at first with the view of deadening his misery, had gradually grown upon him.

A drunkard is, no doubt, very like a madman at times, but madness—a dire and unsought calamity descending

upon us by the visitation of God—was far more calculated to inspire sympathy and compassion than its degraded prototype; and so it had been whispered abroad, chiefly by loyal friends and attached servants, that Sir Harry Davenant had become insane.

After his paralytic stroke, my father's mind had, doubtless, become somewhat affected, but, previous to this, there had been, at any rate, a good deal of method in his madness.

His erring wife had not been permitted to repose within the gloomy precincts of the family vault, but lay sleeping in her nameless grave amongst the humble grass-grown mounds of the simple villagers. How much I should have preferred to rest there,

"Beneath flowers' roots and birds' light feet."

Still, I realised now, that my poor mother's banishment from our grim ancestral charnel-house must have been intended by Sir Harry as a punishment.

Then, too, he had either destroyed every one of his wife's portraits, or hidden them away in lumber-rooms, and he had evidently taken a dislike to me for the very reason which had made George Collingwood love me—because I was *her* child. No doubt he would have hidden me away, too, in a lumber-room, if he had dared. As it was, he had managed to see as little of me as possible!

All this had seemed to me to be very hard to bear at the time. Now, however, I understood, or fancied that I understood, how it was all brought about, and my sympathies were at first entirely upon the side of "poor Sir Harry," as the neighbours round about Northover used pityingly to call him. I found myself taking, indeed, quite the severe moralists' view of my dead mother's weakness. Then suddenly I veered round again, remembering the gentle and beautiful face of the one who was now for ever silent and unable to defend herself. Looking into

my own erring heart, I recognised that *I*, of all women, ought to view with charity the weaknesses of others, and I fell to wondering whether, supposing that I had found myself settled down for life at a dull country-place, with some sort of husband, no matter how worthy and excellent so long as he was not the one man in the world for me, and supposing that Courtenay Davenant had been from time to time my near neighbour, my frequent companion, and always, always—whenever we were thrown together—eager and persistent in his endeavours to win my love I might not, one day, have been taken at a disadvantage and vanquished, as I feared now that my poor mother must have been overcome and vanquished by George Collingwood?

Did she care for him, I wondered, as much as I could care for Courtenay, but for the anxious watch that I was trying to keep over my heart? Her letters to him were upon the dressing-table beside me, within reach of my hand. How easily I could become enlightened upon this subject! But no! I would not commit so cowardly, so base an act; one, too, which could only be productive of further misery to myself! The letters should be given to George Collingwood, the man for whom they were intended, and he should destroy them, after he had read them, so that there would be no danger of their falling, a second time, into evil hands!

For a child to set to work thus to excuse an erring parent, seems somehow, like a distortion of the proper order in nature; nevertheless, I felt somewhat more composed when I fancied that I had fairly taken into consideration all the temptations with which my mother might have found herself environed.

For George Collingwood, my "noble host," as Delphine Dobrowolska had sneeringly called him, I could make none of the excuses that I had been making for my mother. He may have tenderly loved her, but where was the merit in this? It could not have been so very difficult to love her.

Why, however, if this was the case, had he not married her? She had lived close by, with her father, at Croft's Farm. Surely he must have been acquainted with her before she was married to Sir Harry? Whether or no, once she was united to another man, his own neighbour and friend, why did he not leave her to enjoy what, but for him, might have proved a happy and peaceful existence? Alas, why do not people always behave as they should, in this strange world of change and temptation! In spite of my affection for Lord Silchester, I had never regarded him in an ideal light. He was agreeable, clever, possessed of wit, amiability, and a capability for enjoyment, which was at times infectious, but he was no hero. Hugo's words concerning him recurred to my memory, and I was conscious that there was probably a good deal of truth in them.

"George is pre-eminently a materialist," the Prince had said—("a sensualist," I had almost added). "He has no sympathy whatever with the spiritual aspects of life. 'Let us eat, drink, and be merry; everything else is nothing!' expresses his creed to the letter. The best of everything must always be for himself,—nobody else must be allowed to approach it until it has ceased to please him; then it may go, and anybody else may take it who likes!" . . . Certain it was that Lord Silchester was essentially a man of pleasure, a Sybarite, seeking and courting the pleasant impressions in life, and somewhat intolerant of all emotion, however nobly inspired, which tended to disturb his equanimity. He was thoroughly practical, too, either by nature or habit; "the spiritual aspects of life" had no attractions for him. He would have been the last man in the world to sacrifice the enjoyment of the moment, or to mourn over the inevitable. Yes; Hugo had probably been correct in his estimate of my godfather's shallow nature! And yet, and yet,—might there not be another side to it which had escaped

the Prince's observation, and might not this very lightness and flippancy of mood, like the froth upon changeful seas, be merely the surface-matter churned from profounder depths?

I recalled that never-to-be-forgotten evening when, impelled by so many combining forces, I had waited for Hugo in the old summer-house at home, and when, to my surprise and confusion, my godfather had suddenly appeared before me in his stead. The whole scene came back to me so vividly as I sat here, hundreds of miles away, that I could see in imagination the two hares that had been browsing out in the moonlight, scurrying away at the sound of an approaching footstep into the security of the shadowy bracken, and I could smell all the delicious odours of the garden-flowers which had floated upon the air on that English night in August.

There had not been much of the callous Sybarite about George Collingwood then, and now I felt that I could guess the reason of his emotion! I could perceive the meaning now of so many things that had seemed to me to be utterly unaccountable then! Why, for instance, my godfather had been so startled at beholding my letter, when it had fallen upon the floor from the Prince's coat-pocket, and why, at first sight, because of what he had been good enough to term my "peculiar but beautiful handwriting" (so like the handwriting upon the envelopes now before me!) he had "half imagined" that the letter must have been intended for himself. It had reminded him, of course (I thought), of other letters which he had received in the past,—letters written in that "peculiar but beautiful handwriting" which I had taken such pains to imitate, probably upon the very same sort of note-paper, with "Northover Park" embossed upon it in dark-blue letters! And to the old summer-house, too, my mother's favourite resort, tender and romantic memories were still clinging, no doubt, for him! I recollected how, as he passed out

under its rustic porch, he had gathered some of the blossoms from the twining honeysuckle and pressed them to his lips, and how he had said that he would keep them as a remembrance of that "lovely and sacred spot." Yes! I fancied that I could understand all this now! There remained one thing, however, which was still plunged in mystery. Up to the very day of my mother's death, Sir Harry Davenant and George Collingwood had been upon the most friendly terms. My father could have known nothing then of his neighbour's treachery. They were friends still, dear friends, to all appearance, when George Collingwood had caught me up in his arms in the passage. When had the discovery and consequent estrangement taken place? These three letters could have had nothing to do with it, for I had had positive proof that Sir Harry could never have seen them. Was it not more than probable, however, that there may have been others,—letters which my mother had received from the man she loved, and which she may have, unfortunately, omitted to burn? It is so difficult to a woman to harden her heart sufficiently to burn such letters! "What the hand which has become so dear has written shall be surely sacred to me to all time! Some day, should he leave me for another, or be spirited away to the land of shadows, I might not be able to believe, but for these treasured proofs, that I have ever been so blessed and honoured amongst women!" In some such way as this do we reason, and yet, can one well imagine a more bitter agony than that which must surely follow upon the reading of love letters from one who is either unfaithful or dead? Few women would have the courage, once the evil day had actually dawned, to attempt anything so sad and unprofitable!

But how did my father become possessed of any such letters, supposing that they had existed? I could not believe that any man, whatever his suspicions may have been (and in this case it was evident that there were

none), would have desired, after the death of the woman he had loved, to search about for proofs of her infidelity. What had occurred, too, to open my father's eyes, must have occurred so very quickly, and it was unlikely that, whilst the body of his wife was lying stark upon the bed, he would have sought amongst her private correspondence there, in the very chamber of death! And yet, before the day appointed for the funeral, he must have discovered something which rendered her unworthy, in his opinion, of a place in the family vault!

Suddenly, as I sat musing thus, a terrible suspicion flashed upon my troubled mind. I bethought me of the part I had played upon the memorable day of my mother's death,—of the mysterious directions which she had given me about unlocking the tin-box in her wardrobe, her pale and anxious face whilst I got out the two packets of letters; her seeming fear lest I should not accomplish her behest before the return of Celestine Vigon with the soup. And then my own sense of consequential importance, as I carefully deposited my uncle Everard's letters, the packet that was bound round with the black silk riband, in the middle of the blazing wood fire! But was this the packet,—I now asked myself in an agony of sudden apprehension,—which my poor mother had intended that I should destroy? What could have been the use of burning these letters from her only brother? Why should he have written anything to his sister which it would compromise her to have published, even upon the housetops, after her death? And then what was that other packet, the letters which I could not bring myself to burn because of the pretty red seal which adorned them—the seal bearing upon it the impression of the little horse with wings, "Pegasus," as I knew now, "the poet's wingèd steed"? What had my idiotic folly inspired me to do with these letters when my unhappy mother had fainted? I had slipped them just inside the coverlid of her bed, within

easy reach of her hand, together with the gold chain from which hung the key of the tin box. Here, no doubt, my father had found them, just after George Collingwood, his trusted friend, had quitted the room, after my poor mother had breathed her last. And yet, even supposing that he had made this discovery, would he have had the courage, or rather the callousness, to look into the letters at so solemn a moment? Alas! if the letters were indeed compromising ones, it would not have been necessary to read much! The first words probably, of the first letter, would have told him enough! I imagined now that I could perceive precisely how it all happened. He was feeling, perhaps, for her hand—the hand that must have been still warm, hoping maybe to detect some faint pulsation, when his own must have encountered the packet of letters. The circumstance must have struck him as peculiar; he might have fancied that some shock following upon news contained in one of these letters had caused her unexpected death, and so, in an evil moment, he may have examined them. He would at once have recognised the handwriting of his trusted friend. This, coupled with the position in which he had found the letters, may have aroused his suspicions; he may have unfolded one of them and read. . .

"Alas, alas!"—I thought—"miserable, unhappy child! How terribly you were mistaken in supposing that you had rendered your mother a service! Is it not far more probable that your own hand was the means of covering her memory with reproach? Accept, then, without repining, the share of suffering and disgrace which has descended, deservedly, upon your head, and console yourself as best you may with the reflection that *she*, at least, has been spared the pain and humiliation with which your folly might have overwhelmed her had she lived! No punishment can be too severe for you, since nothing can now remedy the consequences of your fatal blunder!"

So I went on tormenting myself till the light, stealing through my closed shutters, told me that the day must be already far advanced, and upon unfastening them and looking forth, I saw that all the gilded domes and steeples were glittering in the bright wintry sunshine.

"*Le secret d'ennuyer*," says Voltaire, "*est celui de tout dire;*" and I fear that I have already more than wearied my readers by this recapitulation of my miserable reflections.

At ten o'clock Mason came to call me, having been told by Miss Warden that I was not to be disturbed until then. Seeing me sitting there in my dressing gown she fancied at first that I had been up some time; then, observing that my hair was still dressed and my bed unslept in, she guessed the truth and began reproaching me.

"You'll be feeling dreadfully tired, miss, later on," she said. "It would have been better to have waited and seen off the company than to have sat up here all by yourself!"

Then she added, after a pause—

"We had a fine disturbance after you were gone! One of the ladies, an Italian Countess—so they said—went off into a sort of hysterics, or convulsions, and then fainted. They sent after me in the cloak-room, and we untied her mask to give her air and threw back the kind of hood she wore over her head, and then I saw what I had been nearly sure of at the first moment of setting eyes upon her, that she was the same fine-looking lady I had seen in the afternoon at the flower shop, and by her side was another person dressed just like her, who I could have taken my oath was '*ma'mselle*,' only she was masked and covered up from top to toe, and I couldn't get to hear her speak. Fancy her impudence, coming to the ball here just as if she was a lady! We passed a damp handkerchief over the face of the lady that fainted. She was certainly a handsome-looking lady enough, but not nearly so young as I thought she was. Her face was

a good deal powdered and painted, as we found out by the handkerchief, and her hair looked very nearly white in some places. By-and-by she came to, and hurried on her mask as if she was quite afraid of being seen with her paint off, and they both went away together and got into their carriage before his lordship knew anything about it. And this morning, when the housemaids were looking round, they came upon this in the room she fainted in. It must have come off when we pulled back her hood."

She opened her apron as she spoke, and I beheld, not without an inward shudder, a thick coil of false hair, black as jet, arranged so as to form a kind of artificial *chignon*.

"I know for certain," Mason went on, "that this is the same hair that the lady was wearing who I met in the flower-shop, only then I fancied that it all grew on her head. I suppose I had better take it down to the porter, although I don't suppose it's very likely that anybody will send to claim such a thing as this!"

To which I replied that I did not suppose so either.

CHAPTER XLV.

Before half-past two o'clock I had established myself in our sitting-room, and was awaiting, with mingled feelings of impatience and apprehension, the hour of Courtenay's coming.

I had pre-arranged my opening sentence, or rather, my

reply to *his* opening sentence, so often, that it had grown quite complicated and difficult to remember. It is foolish at such moments to attempt any kind of set task which has to be learnt by rote, for there is a natural eloquence, the outcome of genuine emotion, which generally ends by putting all our fine phrases to confusion.

I had made up my mind, when I had parted with Courtenay in the ball-room, that to-day I would tell him, in as few words as possible, the history of my life as far as it had gone. I would tell him what, of course, could not fail to surprise him, that I was his cousin Nelly; a wife, and yet not a wife, a widow in almost every sense of the word, and yet unable to make for myself a newer and brighter existence. That I had concealed my identity at first, because of the tragic circumstances which were connected with my husband's name; and that, afterwards, upon hearing of his coming, I had preferred that he should know me as "Miss Collingwood," a stranger—with regard to whom he could have formed neither predispositions nor prejudices—from a foolish feeling of shyness, occasioned by what I had been told about our "family marriage project," and the objection he had had to the scheme. Then, supposing that he had reproached me with all this, I had intended, woman-like, and in spite of what was in my heart, to have turned the tables upon him at once; to declare that it would have been obvious to anybody possessed of a particle of perception, who I was; that I had said things to him in the sledge which must surely have revealed my identity to any one else; and that, if he had ever taken the trouble to interest himself in his cousin, he would have remembered that, as one of her names was "Collingwood," it was not unlikely that Lord Silchester might be her godfather, and that from the very first I had been introduced as the Ambassador's goddaughter.

Since my stormy scene with Madame Dobrowolska,

however, my intentions had undergone a good deal of modification, and I shrank now from revealing myself until I knew more. I dreaded lest any word of this scandalous story concerning my mother might have reached Courtenay's ears in the past. An idol had crumbled, a star had fallen from my heaven. I was ashamed, now, of the being whose memory I had so venerated and adored. Above all, I was ashamed of having lived, thus, in friendly intercourse, with the man who had brought such dishonour upon our house. Only one hope remained to me, a very faint one. The Ambassador, upon seeing the letters, might be able to throw some new light upon their motive and destination. I would give the letters, one by one, into his hand, and ask him to tell me whether or no they had been written by my mother, and I would watch his face attentively whilst he read, and draw my conclusions from its expression. As soon as I was dressed, therefore, which was not until nearly twelve o'clock, I wrote him a few formal lines, begging him to see me, if possible, at once, for I did not wish this interview to clash with Courtenay's. Mason, however, by whom I had sent my note, returned in a few minutes to say that His Excellency, contrary to his usual custom, had gone out more than an hour ago, in consequence of a telegram which he had received upon some urgent political matter (his valet thought). He had not yet returned. So now my interview with Courtenay would have to take place before I had seen him, the contrary of what I had hoped to arrange. The three letters were in my pocket, all ready for his inspection, but I knew nothing more with respect to their authenticity, and I felt nervous, confused, vacillating, and utterly undecided as to what I should say to my cousin. I was looking pale and haggard. It seemed to me as though years must have passed over my head in those last few hours. Sorrow and sleeplessness combined had made me feel bitterly cold. I

was sitting cowering by the stove, vainly trying to warm my hands, when the little English travelling clock upon the writing-table struck three. My heart began beating violently.

"Upon the stroke of three," Courtenay had said to me in the ball-room, "I will be there."

And, true to his word, before the clock had finished striking, I heard the bell at the entrance to our apartment give a sharp tinkle. An instant afterwards a servant announced "Sir Courtenay Davenant." I rose to my feet mechanically and awaited his coming. Not for all the wealth of Peru, supposing that would have benefited me, could I have uttered a word. When I beheld him my whole being became thrilled with a new misery. It flashed upon me that, until now, I had overlooked the bitterest aspect of my situation. What did it signify, in reality, by what name I chose to call myself, whether I was or was not his near kinswoman, and whether my poor mother, in the irrevocable past, had loved, like myself, a man who was not her husband? The misery I was enduring now had nothing to do with all this. It was caused by the consciousness that, apart from anything that might have occurred in the past, I and this man whom I loved must needs go upon our separate ways in the future. Never, whether I called myself "Davenant," or "Collingwood," or "Crecszoleska," could he and I meet again upon the same footing as heretofore, once I had told him my story. This meeting, therefore, was but the prelude to an eternal farewell.

I stood facing him for a few seconds, with all this in my heart. Tears came into my eyes, which I could not control. I observed that he, too, looked pale and unhappy. He took my hand, and then—feeling it so cold and listless, I suppose, or else seeing me looking so wretched—it seemed as if he broke down in some resolve which he might have made to treat me with formality,

and folding me in his arms he covered my face with kisses. They were altogether despairing kisses, as though of renunciation. No doubt that he, too, had fully realised that this was to be our last meeting. By-and-by he led me gently to a sofa, which was placed at right angles with the stove, and sat down upon it by my side.

It will be necessary for me to say here a few words as to the arrangement of our sitting-room. As is generally the case abroad, once a *suite* of apartments is entered, several rooms communicated one with another in succession. Of these our sitting-room was the first, shut off from the corridor upon the one hand by a kind of lobby, and separated from the apartments beyond by folding-doors, in front of which, partly to keep off the draught, and partly to dissimulate the fact that the room possessed anything in common with a passage—stood a large black-and-gold screen of Oriental design; and it was in front of this that the sofa upon which we were seated had been placed.

After a few moments of constrained silence, Courtenay spoke.

"I wish to speak to you to-day," he said, with the manner of one who is making a supreme effort, "quite candidly, and without reserve. Heaven knows that I had no thought of doubting you when we first met. You seemed to me a being too pure for the voice of calumny to assail. You must have known—you must have seen—what my feelings were! Women are so quick at finding out such things! By-and-by, however, suspicions—unworthy suspicions, perhaps—were thrust upon me against my will. Circumstances came to my knowledge by degrees which tortured me and made me wretched. You must let me tell you, Helen, what some of these things were. Loving you as I did, I should not have been human had I not suffered. Let me hear now, from your own lips, that these rumours were false, and I shall

be relieved of a miserable burden. You will see that, to me, this is a matter of life or death; and you will forgive me, I trust, if I unwillingly allude to anything that may cause you pain?"

He looked at me earnestly and regretfully, awaiting my answer. But I could find no words, and so merely nodded my head in assent.

"I understood when I arrived here," he went on by-and-by—speaking slowly and hesitatingly, as though *he*, too, had been learning his lesson by heart, and was anxious to repeat it in the proper order—"that the Ambassador was your uncle. Several people told me this. I said to myself that you must be a sister of my old friend Tom Collingwood; and such is the effect of the imagination that I even fancied that I observed a likeness—something in your voice and in the way you expressed yourself. Then I remembered that Tom Collingwood had never had a sister, and so I made up my mind that you were probably a cousin; and, having occasion to write to him at about this time, I mentioned you in my letter—you may guess in what terms—assuming that you were his relation."

"But did I ever tell you that I was his relation?" I put in, eagerly. "You asked me no questions upon this subject until quite lately. Absolve me, at any rate, from having wished to deceive you in this! Last night, when you questioned me, I told you that Lord Silchester was not my uncle—that he was my godfather, and a very dear and kind old friend, but no relation. Why did you not question me sooner?"

"Because, Helen, you seemed to be always so anxious to avoid me. As you know, we had but few opportunities of talking together privately. Whenever I sought to take advantage of any of these you appeared to resent it. If I ever ventured to ask you a question I fancied that you seemed to be embarrassed. God knows how I plotted

and planned to drive back with you that night in the sledge!"

"You admit, then, that I tried to prevent all this misery!" I cried, passionately, "and that it was *you* who strove to bring it about? Did I not tell you, as we drove home that night, that I was bound and tied?"

"You did," he answered, turning very pale; "must we, then, go on being miserable still?"

"Do you mean—has nothing changed since that evening?"

"Yes; are you still 'bound and tied,' as you were then?"

"Nothing has changed since that evening," I answered sadly.

"But then, Helen, you told me that you were bound by duty, not by affection. This made me hope on. I loved you so much that I was prepared to endure almost anything for your sake. Then came these horrible stories, chapter and verse given, statements which I was utterly powerless to disprove; and which, sometimes, everything seemed to confirm. Tom Collingwood, too, wrote to say that he had never had a female cousin of his own name; and he asked me—meaning, of course, no harm—to find out whether some of the family diamonds, which his uncle had sent for from his banker's, were for the young lady who was being passed off as Miss Collingwood? I got this letter last Saturday evening; on Sunday morning the diamonds arrived by the messenger; and, last night, I saw you wearing them at the ball. Beautiful as they looked in your beautiful hair—the sight of them, after what I had heard, nearly drove me mad. I should have liked to have torn them off your head, and stamped them under foot. Then I thought it would be wiser to tear your image out of my heart instead."

"You seem to have very readily believed evil of me," I said, as proudly and reproachfully as I could; "a few

gossiping stories, invented by jealous, mischief-making people, come to your ears, and at once you condemn me unheard—the woman you profess to love!"

"Indeed, no!" he exclaimed, earnestly, as he took one of my hands in both his own; "indeed, indeed, I came here hoping that you would tell me with your own lips that these stories were calumnies and inventions! Make me believe in you, again, Helen; ease my heart of all these miserable suspicions, and I shall bless you as long as I live! If I venture to question you now, if I wound you by my seeming doubts, forgive me, I implore you! I have but one object: to refute these infamous rumours, and to set at rest for ever the suspicions they have given rise to. Answer me, then, Helen; and, for God's sake, tell me the truth: Were you ever at a place in Piedmont, an old monastery, called St. Dalmas de Tende?"

"Yes," I answered, faintly; determined that I would make no more concealments; "I was there in the autumn of last year."

"And whilst you were there—forgive me for asking you this; afterwards, I will explain why I am compelled to do so—did you call yourself 'Miss Collingwood,' as now, or by another name, which was not your own, the name of a married woman?"

"Yes, I called myself by the name of a married woman."

His countenance fell as I finished speaking. The haggard look returned to it, and the expression of hope died out of his eyes. He let go of my hand, and, after a pause, resumed, in a changed voice:

"And you had a reason—a sad, an unfortunate reason—for thus passing as a married woman; and Lord Silchester was with you at this time?"

"Yes, I had a reason and Lord Silchester was with me; he consoled and supported me through that miserable time."

"But the people of the place—the proprietor and the

servants—were not aware that Lord Silchester was staying there? He had reasons, as well as yourself, for wishing to conceal his name?"

"Yes; he had reasons," was all that I could summon voice to reply.

Courtenay was speaking now—I fancied—quite sternly and bitterly, as a man devoid of either love or compassion might speak to some poor erring wretch, for whose sorrow and humiliation he could spare no grain of sympathy. His manner seemed to freeze the life-blood in my veins.

"He is a fair-weather friend," I thought, bitterly; "whilst he saw me flattered and admired, he imagined that he was in love with me. Now, when he thinks that I am only some unfortunate girl who has been betrayed and disgraced in the past, he can cast me at once from his heart, without a pang. He suspects, now, that I am utterly unworthy of his love; and, with this, his love changes immediately into contempt. What an easy transition! How many might well envy him his philosophy!"

Then to these bitter reflections succeeded sadder, tenderer memories. From this frost-bound northern city, I was transported, in fancy, to that peaceful Italian valley at the foot of the *Col de Tende*. There, in the cleft of the blue hills, rose the white belfry of the old convent. I saw the tall, waving meadow-grass by the river, bright with butterflies and fragrant with flowers. Then the scene changed, and I seemed to be lying nigh unto death in my bedroom—the room which had once been a chapel, with its high, vaulted roof, the room in which little George had been born; and I saw the old *padre* of Briga passing to and fro between the bed and the three tall lancet windows in his rusty *soutane*. I thought, as the tears came into my eyes, that if only my child had lived I should never have found myself in this humiliating position: seeming altogether at the mercy of this man, who had come to cross-question me, as though I had been an arraigned

criminal. I should have had an interest, an object in life—something to satisfy the hunger and longing of my heart, which would effectually have protected me from all the more dangerous and disturbing forms of affection. I saw, in imagination, the cold, placid little face—the lids fast closed over the eyes that had never opened upon the new world that he had left so soon. And then, all in the space of a second, I had wandered away to the peaceful graveyard upon the green hill-side, and stood once more by the little mound with its cross of wooden fretwork. My garland was hanging there still, the flowers as fresh as upon the day when I had gathered them. To the left nestled the little brown village of Briga—the home of honest, simple-hearted peasant-folk, who knew nothing of the passions and ambitions which agitate stormier lives. Now and again the bells of the wandering flocks tinkled upon my ear; whilst, far away, rose those elfin tents—the peaks of the high snow mountains—one above another; dimpled upon one side by soft shadows, and flushed upon the other with the pink glow of the sunset.

What a calm, tranquil, beautiful scene! A haven of rest—of oblivion—for a troubled storm-tossed spirit! I covered my face with my hands, and burst into tears at the remembrance of it.

"Oh! that I could be at peace," I cried, "amongst those quiet mountains, by the side of my poor little George!"

The words escaped me involuntarily; almost as though my thoughts had taken voice.

"George was the name of your child?" Courtenay asked by-and-by; "called, I presume, after Lord Silchester?"

"Yes; called after Lord Silchester," I answered, wearily, drying my eyes and striving to stifle my emotion.

I know now what I did not know then,—that all this time, whilst I fancied that Courtenay was experiencing for me nothing warmer than contempt, his heart was going

out to me in reality, in compassion, in tenderness, and in love. If he had known me at first only as some poor, repentant Magdalen, and grown to care for me in spite of my unfortunate past, he might, perhaps, have shown me more of what was passing in his heart. But he had chosen to set me upon so exalted a pinnacle. Compared to all other women, I seemed—as he has told me since, even what those far snow-mountains were to the lower hills; and an illusion of this kind, thus suddenly destroyed, coming to him with the sharp pang of a severed nerve, paralysed him for the moment through the sheer force of its agony.

Then, when he could think at all, he fell to wondering (it seems) why he could not hate me after all he had heard; why, on the contrary, his love seemed only to have grown stronger and more desperate. He knew,—seeing that he had always admired most that which is most admirable in woman,—that this could not be because, as he then imagined, I was altogether fallen and unworthy; but because, through a combination of shame, of bitterness, of jealous misery, he was enabled to realise how great a part I had previously had in his life, and how precious even this shattered idol must ever be to his heart. And so, in pity, in love, in desperation, with no kind of set purpose or hope for the future, but only for the momentary solace, he would have clasped me again in his arms, only that I, knowing nothing of all this, and thinking that he meant merely to treat a light woman lightly, thrust him resolutely from me, as one might thrust something that was personally repellent, and, rising to my feet, I went towards the door, in order to make my escape to my bed-room.

But, before I could reach it, a servant presented himself, and informed me that His Excellency had only just received my letter. He had been absent all the morning, but could see me now if it was convenient to me to receive

him. "I will receive him at once," I said, desperately, feeling that some change, were it only in the nature of my sufferings, would be a kind of relief.

The footman departed to deliver this message, and I went back to the sofa, near to which Courtenay was standing, looking pale, miserable, and angry. A mistaken sense of jealousy, I suppose, caused him to mutter a few mad words of reproach and renunciation. Then he said, almost fiercely,

"Let me get out of this room before he comes to you! You cannot wish me to make a third at such an interview! I cannot meet him after what I have just heard. Good-bye!" He was pushing past me towards the door, but I stopped him.

"No, no!" I exclaimed, with the determination begotten of despair; "you must not go yet! You *shall* make a third party at this interview—I desire it—and you owe me this reparation after all the unworthy suspicions you have nourished against me! I have told you nothing that could have prejudiced you against one of the kindest of my friends had not your mind been filled with foregone conclusions which have made you misinterpret and distort everything you have heard. Now, however, you can hear the truth; you will learn, at any rate, how you have misjudged the unhappy woman whom you professed to love."

I folded back a flap of the large black screen as I spoke, and disclosed a dark nook, bounded by the double doors, which seemed made on purpose for eaves-droppers.

"No, no!" he whispered breathlessly; but I was determined.

"Come, I implore you, I beg of you!" I pleaded, meeting his eyes boldly for the first time. "Do me this favour, the only one I shall ask of you,—for the sake of the love you say you have borne me. Hear now, with your own ears, what may console you, perhaps, if you really care for me! quick! hide yourself! the Ambassador is coming!"

and I thrust him, very much against his will, behind the great black screen. I had scarcely done so when Lord Silchester entered the apartment.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SEEING me in such a terrible state of agitation, my whole frame trembling, and my eyes still wet with weeping, Lord Silchester was naturally alarmed.

"Dearest Helen, what can have happened?" he asked, anxiously, taking my two hands in his own. "You have not heard any bad news?" And he drew me, as Courtenay had done, to the sofa.

"Don't shrink away from me, dear, as if I were an enemy!" he went on, by-and-by, although I was quite unconscious of any such shrinking, "but tell me what made you write me such a cold, stiff, little letter this morning? How have I managed to get myself into such sudden disgrace?" I felt embarrassed as to how to reply. I had written, it is true, much more formally than usual, for I was smarting at the moment under the painful emotions evoked by what I regarded as the discovery of his treachery. I had sent for him with a particular object. The letters with which I intended to confront him were all ready for him to examine, and yet, now that I came to think of it, how could I possibly question him upon this subject whilst Courtenay Davenant was listening from behind the screen?

I had insisted upon his making an unwilling third at this interview, because I saw that he was determined to put a wrong construction upon it, and because I wished him to hear with his own ears what would surely absolve me in his eyes from all suspicion. But might

not the words which he was about to hear, whilst exonerating me, shed shame and dishonour upon another? I remained staring absently at the Ambassador, not knowing what to do or to say. As I gazed into his face I perceived that it looked worn and anxious, as it had looked upon the previous night when I had come upon him in the corridor in company with the Russian officers.

Before I could inquire as to what might be the cause of his anxiety he said affectionately—

"Since we have been together, Helen, my one wish has been to please you. Tell me how I have failed?"

"You have not failed," I answered, "to *me* you have always been kindness, generosity, goodness itself. But it is not about myself that I wish to speak."

Then, thinking of the interpretation which Courtenay would be almost certain to put upon these words, I cast down my eyes in the greatest embarrassment. At that moment, as it chanced, they encountered what I must have seen very often before, without, however, paying any attention to it—a little gold seal, with nothing remarkable about it whatsoever, which, together with a small heart-shaped locket, hung down from the Ambassador's watch-chain.

"May I look at that seal?" I asked; but before he could answer me I had turned the stone to the light and was examining it attentively.

As I had anticipated, the little "Pegasus," which had so captivated my childish fancy,—was scampering across it at full speed. What crowding memories were evoked at sight of him! . . .

"Has this always belonged to you? Have you often sealed your letters with it?" I inquired, eagerly.

"How strange, my child, that *you*, of all people, should ask me this!" he answered, looking surprised. "No; this seal did not belong to me always! It belonged to

some one I was once very fond of, and who is dead now. To *you*, I daresay, it appears absurd that an old fogey like me should ever have cared about anybody, and still more so that my affection should have been returned! Well, well! We've most of us had some kind of romance in our lives, and mine has been over and done with a very long time ago! There hangs her poor little seal, however, where I can look at it every day! I've never sealed any letters with it but the letters I used to write to her, and I never shall." He glanced down at the little seal tenderly and regretfully, and then let it drop with a quick sigh.

To me—jealous, after some strange, unaccountable fashion, on my mother's behalf—this sigh seemed to breathe too cheerful a spirit of resignation to the inevitable. Since he had wrought all this mischief I could have wished, just then, to believe that he had really suffered for it—mourning and lamenting secretly to the end of his days; whereas this sigh seemed only to mean: "It is useless to recall what can only give me pain. My romance is over and done with; the woman who gave me this seal is dead and buried. It is best not to think about her any more!" I scarcely know, however, what he could have said or done at this particular moment, which would have appeared to me to be altogether decorous and appropriate. I was hardening my heart against him, and just then he could not do right.

I felt in my pocket for the letters. They were there, under my hand.

"Lord Silchester," I said, summoning all my courage, "as you say you wish so much to please me, do me now this favour. I wish to speak to you about that person who is dead—the person who gave you that seal. To *me* her name must ever be sacred. Do not mention it, therefore; walls are said, sometimes, to have ears. I will not speak of her by her name, then, but speak of her I must,

and I will tell you why. Last night, at the ball, a woman about whose name we need not be so particular—Madame Dobrowolska—came up to me without any provocation and insulted me. You will know that she was there, for she told me that she had seen and spoken to you. What she said about me affected me but little—at any moment I can refute it—but she made cruel and malicious accusations also against that other person; and to prove them, she produced three letters. I would not read them; you will see why; they were not intended for me. I cannot say, therefore, whether they are really written by that person. *You*, however, will be able to tell. Look at them now; I have them here for your inspection."

A change came over his face as I finished speaking. My words seemed to pain and surprise him too much for him to reply to them at once. He took up the letters with hands that trembled visibly, and gazed earnestly at the directions upon the envelopes.

"I don't understand," he murmured, after a while, in a voice that sounded quite feeble and broken. "What is the meaning of this? I am altogether bewildered! When were these letters written, and why did I never see them till now?"

"I do not know," I answered; "when you have read perhaps you will understand. Some wicked person—from an evil motive—must have kept back the letters instead of sending them to the post. Read them, and then tell me truly whether they were written by *her*. This is all I wish to know."

I have heard it remarked that young people are often cruel, harsh, and intemperate in their judgments,—intolerant with regard to such failings in their elders, as are consequent upon conditions in which they have never been placed themselves. In the present instance, however, I could plead, in extenuation of any such seeming

sternness, no such excuse of ignorance. I had known what it was to suffer and to love. I fancied that I had a tolerably correct notion, too, of what it must be like to be tempted; and towards any other man, placed in a similar situation, I hope that I could have felt some manner of Christian charity.

It was, no doubt, the intrusion of the narrowing personal element which caused me to lash myself into such a mood of virtuous indignation against the man at my side—the man I had come to regard as the seducer of my mother's honour—the destroyer of my father's happiness. His very kindness and devotion to myself seemed now to take the form of an additional outrage. What business had he, of all men, to thrust himself upon my friendship—to treat me as a *protégée*, and embarrass me with favours and obligations?

To think of this now, and of the affection with which I had always regarded him, was little short of agony to me. I looked at him, endeavouring, with all my might, to hate him, and then hated myself because, on account of so many crowding memories, I fell short of my intention. His face, meanwhile, had assumed a ghastly pallor. He looked, as he had said of himself, "utterly bewildered." My judicial manner, no doubt, pained and surprised him. I could quite imagine that a circumstance which, to me, seemed fraught with such tragic importance, might have appeared merely in the light of a romantic adventure to the man of pleasure—the "materialist," whose creed was "Let us eat, drink, and be merry—everything else is nothing."

But as I watched him unfold, and read, the first of the three letters, I could no longer associate him with this fancy portrait of Hugo's.

To me there is always something alarming and embarrassing in the distress of a being of the sterner sex, and I almost wished, as I witnessed the Ambassador's

emotion, that I had kept the letters to myself. For some moments he could not trust himself to speak. I saw that he was weeping like a woman. Alas, I could no longer hope that the letters might turn out to be forgeries.

"Oh, God!" he exclaimed, presently, with a gesture of despair, "what fiend, what devil, intercepted these letters? But she must have known, she must have guessed, that I never received them. She must have guessed it! . . ."

I drew away towards the further end of the sofa so that I might not intrude upon his agony, whilst with many half-stifled exclamations of emotion he continued reading. I was profoundly affected at the sight of his unhappiness. He was being punished, I thought, and severely punished, for some of the evil he had wrought in the past, and my heart went out to him now in sympathy and compassion.

By-and-by, recovering himself with an effort, he said, taking my hand:

"Helen, in spite of all that happened so long ago—nay, rather, *because* of it, and because, too, of more than I am able to tell you—you and I must always remain good friends. When you know more of the world you will find that such things have happened very often before, ever since the days of David the Psalmist, and before that again,—you may be sure! I do not say this in extenuation; to me is due all the blame. You may reproach me as much as you like, but you must not turn against me. You have become a part of my life, and without you all interest in existence would go. Think, my child, of all my devotion to you. Before you can remember, when you were only a tiny baby. Look!" and he opened the little heart-shaped locket which hung from his chain by the side of the gold seal, "look at this little curl of yellow hair, cut off only a few days after you were born; you wouldn't recognise it, now, as yours, would you?" He slipped the locket off its split ring and gave it into my

hand. My fingers trembled so that I could scarcely hold it, and my eyes filled with tears, making it difficult for me, at first, to see what was inside it. Then, when my tears had fallen and I could see more plainly, I held it up to the light and perceived two locks of hair set together. A dark brown lock, and, in the centre of it, in sharp contrast, a tiny golden ringlet; and at sight of this, and of the look of hungry yearning in the eyes of the man at my side, a revelation came to me, the import of which I could not mistake. The voice of nature had spoken.

He saw that I had guessed the truth which he dared not tell me in words. We did not speak, but he held out his arms to me, and we wept together in silence.

I know not how long it was before, hearing a footstep, I looked up. Courtenay Davenant was standing close beside us.

The Ambassador, thinking that he had entered the room unheard, during these moments of supreme emotion, thrust me from him in hasty embarrassment. But I felt almost too weary, too shattered, to care now what anybody, even Courtenay, might think of me.

"Tell him who I am," I said, at last, addressing Lord Silchester. "He has a right to know everything. Tell him that I am, that I was, Helen Davenant."

"Helen Davenant!" exclaimed Courtenay, staggering back in astonishment.

He gazed with a bewildered expression from one to the other of us, and then, turning to the Ambassador, he said slowly, with the manner of one from whose eyes scales have suddenly fallen,

"I see it all now! I understand! If I had not been blinded by jealousy I should have seen it all sooner,—by the likeness, by everything! This young lady is your daughter. I heard from Sir Harry's own lips that Helen Davenant was not really my cousin."

I could not answer him. I could summon neither words

nor ideas. The Ambassador, too, remained silent. By-and-by, Courtenay went on:

"It seems like a dream to me," he said, in a broken voice, "that we two, after all these years, should come together like this. Lord Silchester, I love Helen Davenant. She knows it. I have told her so. For God's sake let there be now no secrets between us three! Tell me everything."

"Tell him everything," I repeated, my voice sounding in my own ears quite faint and far off. "Tell him that I am married, that we can never be anything to one another, that we meet now only to part again for ever."

I felt that the cup of my misery was filled to overflowing. A numb sense of resignation was stealing over my spirit. I think the dead must feel very much as I felt at that moment.

"I will tell him," Lord Silchester answered, speaking as with a supreme effort. "But, Helen, I have more to tell than you know of. I came here this morning to break to you some news—sudden, unexpected news—that to your kind and compassionate heart cannot fail to be painful and distressing. Seeing you so agitated I dared not tell you at once. How will you be able to bear it now?"

"I can bear anything," I said, wearily; "a little more or less pain, what can it matter? I am hardened to pain now."

"Then, my dearest Helen, you are no longer a wife. Hugo Crecszoleski died last night by his own hand. They sent for me early this morning to tell me about it. I pray, my child, that any future you may make for yourself will be brighter and happier than your past."

CHAPTER XLVII.

WHAT more remains to be told of the story of Helen Davenant, the waves of whose stormy existence seem, at length, to have lashed themselves into a grateful calm?

Of the particulars of Hugo Crecszoleski's death—tragic as were several of the circumstances of his life—I must first inform my readers; because, with that strange, morbid personality, my own lot seemed once to be so irrevocably bound up and blended; and because, even now, when he has gone from me, I cannot, yet, be quite the same as if I had never fallen in with him. Memories, comparisons, obscure phrases, having to do with him and his mysterious philosophy, are constantly recurring to my mind; and so, in spite of myself, an influence—pathetic, now, rather than sinister—is often with me still; as though some poor wandering ghost, not knowing where to go for comfort, hovered, at times, near at at hand, craving for pardon and an occasional tender remembrance.

Hugo, then, after the visit of his sister which had followed immediately upon my own, appeared, to those who had charge of him, to be much as usual. He read and wrote, as was his habit, some way into the night, and then retired to rest. Between one and two o'clock the attendant, who slept in the next room, was aroused by hearing a groan. He went at once to the Prince's bedside, where a ghastly spectacle presented itself. Hugo had cut his throat from ear to ear, and he expired before the doctor had been awakened from his slumbers. They would not allow me to look upon him when he was dead, but told me that his face wore a calm and peaceful expression, strangely at variance with the manner in which such peace and calm had been attained.

There can be no doubt but that his suicide was premeditated, and carefully planned in all its details. He had been terribly clever, as people having such intentions usually are, about obtaining and secreting a razor; saying, quite cheerfully, that, as he had begun to receive visits from ladies, he must not appear before them like a savage, and so that he wished to be shaved. Then he had put off the attendant who came to carry out his wishes, to the morrow, after he had managed to abstract what he required for the perpetration of the fatal deed. I can but lay the blame of it at the door of the woman who had already brought so much misfortune upon us all. That *she*, too, was in some sense distraught, and morally irresponsible for her acts, I am willing, nay anxious, to believe; for I should not like to think that any human creature would have elected to be so evil-natured by choice.

Certain it was, that, after the interview which she had contrived by a series of cunning machinations, upon a day when she had ascertained that Dr. Schumann would be absent from home, her unfortunate brother must have made up his mind that he would rather die than go through another. In this extraordinary woman, poor Hugo had always recognised his evil genius, rendered all the more formidable and insidious by reason of the tie of kinship by which he was united to her. Her presence must have reminded him of everything that he was most anxious to forget. Peace, freedom, and tranquility of spirit, the hope of even being able to continue, uninterruptedly, his favourite studies, must have vanished at sight of her. Knowing that she was actually staying in St. Petersburg, although shrouding her identity under a false name, he anticipated, without doubt, a return to the degrading thraldom which had oppressed and crushed him in the past, and with this, too, since some manner of affection was so strangely commingled with his aversion, may

have combined some fears for his sister's personal safety. And so, all this anxiety and dread must have decided him, suddenly, to free his spirit from the remnants of humanity that still clung to it, and which impeded its flight to those unknown regions in which he had dwelt for so long in imagination. A letter directed to me, and which confirmed me in the above theory, was found upon the table after the Prince had breathed his last. It was written with a steady hand, and ran as follows:

"My beloved Helen; 'beloved' in spite of the arbitrary conditions which have combined, for awhile, to separate us; your visit of to-day, I beg you to believe and to remember, afforded me as much satisfaction and comfort as it is possible for me now to derive from any such circumstance. Your brave, unfettered spirit—your noble intelligence—fortified and revived me; your beauty, which in the first instance attracted me to your side, was to-day the only influence which alarmed and repelled me when in your presence. Whilst contemplating you thus, in your adorable freshness of youth, I became conscious that my spiritual regeneration was, as yet, but imperfectly accomplished. The vanities, the emotions of the flesh, were still powerful to tempt and ensnare. If my manner seemed in any degree distant or constrained, attribute it to this cause alone, which with the influence of time must needs have been overcome. But events have been otherwise ordered. With *you*,—my good and invigorating influence,—a malignant and depressing one has, unfortunately, reasserted itself. I feel powerless, without your aid, to check and counteract it. Better, far better, that all should end, as I have determined, when this letter shall be concluded; and that the immortal spirit should regain its eternal freedom! For freedom, at least from one insupportable thraldom, I shall find, although I dare not hope to attain at once to the highest happiness, and acquire a celestial vehicle immediately after quitting this

earthly one. As the Platonists have unanimously determined, 'the souls of men that are not heroically virtuous will find themselves restrained within the compass of this caliginous air;' till, by degrees, becoming purified, they will assume an ethereal splendour, undimned by any misty obscurity, and which casts no shadow. Then, my beloved wife, I shall rejoin the soul of our son, who, by reason of the purity and simpleness of his terrene body, assumed immediately upon departing from you an aërial form; and so must needs be still separated for a while from his earthly father. You will doubtless find in the world, after I have quitted it, many sincere and devoted friends, who will be anxious to protect you. There should not be any difficulty, either, with respect to a suitable provision for you, once you become my widow. My advice is, that our good friend George should apply directly to the Emperor. But I am unequal to the consideration of such matters at present. '*Quorsum haec alio properantibus*'? —that is to say, such things must be as nothing to men hastening to another purpose. Farewell, then, my beloved Helen; my thoughts are with you at this supreme moment —my spirit seeks you to bid you adieu! *Laissesmoi errer quelques instants auprès de toi, et emporter ce souvenir dans l'éternité!* Be happy; but think sometimes of your unfortunate

"HUGO."

I was dreadfully shocked and distressed at this terrible news. The heart of woman is complex, and capable of experiencing at the same moment the most conflicting emotions. There were memories connected with the man who was once my husband which were tender and compassionate, and these reasserted their influence as soon as he was no more. I cannot agree with Shakespeare, that it is "the evil which men do" that generally survives them. In my own case, at least, this was what seemed

to have been "interred" with poor Hugo's bones. Often and often, of late, had I sighed to regain my liberty; I had desired, with all my heart, that the bonds that bound me should be loosened. But I had never asked myself how this end was to be achieved; for I knew that even the hoped-for things which are occasionally vouchsafed to us here scarcely ever come quite in the manner we have planned or foreseen. "*Il faut espérer le moins ce qu'on désire le plus*," says Christina of Sweden, whose sentiments were so much nobler than many of her actions. And so, because above all things I desired my freedom, I had never hoped—or castle-built—or imagined for myself any possible new life; and now, at last, when liberty had been vouchsafed to me, I seemed for a while to be like some poor suddenly-released prisoner, who, after the obscurity and closeness of a dungeon, can scarcely bear to look at the blessed sunlight or to breathe the fresh breezes of heaven.

I often wonder, as I look back to this time, what caused me to see, or to imagine that I saw, that ghastly figure reflected in the long mirror at the Embassy ball; at the very moment, too, when, if I may believe poor Hugo's last words, his spirit was seeking me to bid me farewell? The truth of all the many authentic stories regarding such strange appearances seems never, as yet, to have been altogether proved or disproved. For the brain of even a conscientious seer may be heated or over-wrought, and the image it conjures up merely a consequence of delirium. For myself, I have only set down here what I cannot but think that I saw—for a moment only—for in another the figure had vanished, or rather, it had merged, as it were, into a couple of fantastically-dressed dancers. I cannot be certain, however, whether at that moment the testimony of my own eyes was worthy of credit or not, and it seems to me that this uncertainty must always exist. Hamlet's remark to Horatio might be appropriately quoted in ex-

planation, only it has been appropriately quoted so very often before!

Almost immediately after Hugo's tragical death I was stricken down by illness, before I had time to arrange my departure from St. Petersburg. The doctor said that I was suffering from nervous prostration. I was nursed with tenderness and devotion, and, in the course of a few weeks, I gradually regained my strength.

As I was lying down one day, reading, upon the sofa in our sitting-room—the scene of some of the most harrowing moments of my life—I was informed that a "person, looking like a dressmaker," desired to speak to me; and so, being just then in the midst of ordering new mourning, I asked the footman to show "the person" in.

What was my astonishment when Celestine Vigon, brisk, smiling, and seeming to be totally unabashed, presented herself before me! She appeared to me to be but little altered by the passing of these years, which had wrought, in some, so many changes. Her hair was as black as ever, her teeth as white—her manner as easy, cheerful, and self-confident—as in the old days when I was only a little child. One would have said, to look at her, that a thoroughly good conscience had made her at peace with herself and all the world. Before I had recovered from my astonishment, she had begun a long rambling statement in French. At first I could not understand the drift of it. By-and-by I realised that it was a denunciation of her employer, Madame Dobrowolska, couched in plausible and polite phraseology; her eloquence being apparently inspired and sustained by that same consciousness of right which seemed to shed a radiance upon her countenance.

"*Madame la Comtesse*," she said, "had just quarrelled with her, they had now parted company for ever. The Countess had turned upon her, and vituperated her, simply because she had threatened—failing the promise

of a certain sum, which she could easily have afforded—to denounce her to the Russian authorities. One threatened things, sometimes, in moments of warmth, which one did not always mean to put into execution. Madame, however, had become furious; she had called her a traitress, a serpent, and had accused her of *lâcheté*, of ingratitude, and of endeavouring to extort money "by *chantage*." All this, she said, was very unjust. What, after all, had she to be so very grateful for? Madame had, without a doubt, paid her well once upon a time; but she had always received in return the full value of her money. Lately, however, she had led with her the life of a dog, of a galley-slave; and the money had been doled out with great parsimony, madame pleading in excuse for this her poverty and reduced circumstances; whereas, if she would only abstain from gambling, and from associating with sharpers and adventurers who preyed upon her, there would be amply sufficient money for them both! This passion for play had led the Countess to form the most undesirable acquaintances—most of them persons entirely devoid of principle. With one of these—an individual calling himself the Count de l'Aquila, and whose name she had assumed in order to obtain an invitation for the fancy ball—she had departed, now, for Monte Carlo. They had invented a system (so many people imagined they had done this!) and meant to *faire sauter la banque*, failing which the Countess had spoken of suicide by means of a pan of charcoal—but this was probably only said to deceive her creditors! With regard to the catastrophe which took place so many years ago, she (Celestine) had been present when it occurred. Quite by accident, when seeking for Zoubiroff—who occasionally assisted the Prince with his experiments—she had penetrated to the scene of the murder, and had witnessed the final act. This accident had proved a fortunate one, procuring for her many solid advantages.

"*Monsieur le Prince*" had always behaved to her with the greatest generosity. Madame, too, for some time, treated her with consideration. Those were lucky days! Since, then, however, everything had changed. Madame had become *difficile* and *exigeante;* she gave way to all kinds of *toquades* and caprices, and no longer lived in the same *luxe.* Sometimes, indeed, there had been actual discomfort to encounter; it was high time, therefore, that persons who respected themselves should separate from her. It was a case of positive *dégringolade* of morals, and she had never felt any real attachment for the Countess.

There was one other subject (she went on) which she desired to speak about. *Madame la Comtesse* was aware that she (Celestine) was possessed of three important letters; she had, in fact, obtained them at madame's instigation, in order that she might assure herself of certain facts. These letters she had been bidden to bring with her to the fancy ball, at which, but for madame's insistance, she would never have ventured to present herself. Whilst she was there madame had taken these letters from her, to serve a particular purpose (so she said); after which they were to be restored to her again. Since then, however, she had never beheld them; and, upon asking that they might be returned to her, madame had referred her to the young lady—*Miladi* Davenant's daughter—at the *Ambassade d'Angleterre.* Madame was furiously angry when she had demanded the value of the letters, even declaring that she had been instrumental in hastening Lady Davenant's death by exceeding her instructions; and that of this she would accuse her if she continued to annoy her. This, however—"*parole d'honneur*"—was false! She had certainly administered to *miladi* a soothing preparation, such as might, with safety, be given to an infant. Madame was herself the cause of this, having desired her to obtain immediately a packet of important letters. How could she carry out these instruc-

tion when Lady Davenant was so much in her bedroom, unless by some such means as she had employed? As it was, she had failed in her search—no letters were found; but madame was too rejoiced at *miladi's* death to be annoyed at this. Certainly she would not have cared at that time who might have hastened it; and it was possible—only she could not now remember clearly—that, to encourage madame to display a generous impulse, she might even have insinuated that she had had some hand in it; but the truth was, a harmless opiate was all she had administered. She had since heard that it could only be injurious to persons possessed of weak hearts; but this she did not know at the time. She was sure (she continued) that, after this satisfactory explanation, I should no longer *porter rancune*, but that I would give her the price she had originally demanded for the letters from Sir Harry Davenant, that is to say, one thousand two hundred and fifty francs, or fifty pounds sterling, English money. She would not make two prices, nor would she have made even this moderate demand but for the position in which she now found herself, a position of absolute *gêne*. Would I have the obligingness to make her a little present of fifty pounds? Then, without waiting for my reply, she began to expatiate upon her affection for her mother, and of how she had determined that she should want for nothing in the *maison de santé* in which she had placed her close to *Arras*, in the *Pas-de-Calais*.

As Celestine Vigon was speaking—I fancied that I could see, in imagination, the figure of the old French peasant-woman: bent, toothless, palsied, wearing her high white cap and long earrings, a gold cross, perhaps, upon the coloured kerchief covering her shrivelled neck; crouching over her *chaufferette*, or knitting away, in spite of being *en plein radotage*, at a blue worsted stocking. And then, I seemed to see the money from this dutiful daughter—that was over and above what she required to

keep her in luxuries and fine clothes—coming in regularly to the doctor for the necessities of the poor, simple, grateful old woman; the blood-money, the hush-money, the money that was the price of her daughter's infamy and dishonour!

I remained gazing at this woman, in astonishment, for some seconds after she had finished speaking. She must have thought me stupid, or deaf, or very ill indeed. Perhaps she fancied that I did not understand French. But I did not care what she thought of me. Of *her*, I was thinking: "Why were you made thus utterly wanting in moral sense? The omission is not marked half plainly enough upon your sprightly, handsome, and ingenuous-looking face. What indication could any stranger obtain, by studying it, of the baseness and wickedness of which you are capable? And yet, not altogether deliberate wickedness, either, nor yet quite deliberate baseness; seeing that you have always felt convinced of the nobility of your motives, and that a consciousness of right has supported you through all your abominable wrong-doing! It would be useless for me to reproach you, to denounce you, to give expression to the abhorrence I feel for your acts; you would never understand. So I had better not trust myself to enter on a discussion with you, but get rid of you as soon as possible."

Acting upon this determination, therefore, I told her as briefly as possible that I had handed over the letters to Lord Silchester, to whom they were addressed, and that if she desired to make a traffic out of what had never honestly belonged to her, she had better communicate with him upon the subject. I added that I knew nothing about continental law; but that, in England, to steal a letter was accounted a felony, which was punishable by a severe penalty.

She lifted her dark eyebrows in astonishment upon hearing this; but said, nevertheless, as she tripped out

of the room, with a polite bow, that she would seek an interview with his Excellency at once.

* * * * *

Those unfortunate letters are now no longer in existence. They had been destroyed, indeed, before Celestine Vigon reached the presence of the Ambassador. Of her interview with him I know no more than that, representing herself as penniless, he agreed upon certain conditions, to pay her expenses to Paris, where she said that she was certain of being able to obtain a livelihood.

I have reason to believe, although I have gained what information I possess upon the subject in vague, indirect ways, and at irregular intervals of time, that Celestine's advent at Northover Park was due in some sense to Lord Silchester's own influence. He was living at this time in Paris; my poor mother had asked him to find her a clever French maid. Madame Dobrowolska, a great authority then upon matters connected with dress and fashion, had been applied to by him; and thus this serpent came to be introduced into the quiet English country-home, where lurked unsuspected so many of the recognised elements of melodrama.

But even before my mother's marriage, Delphine Dobrowolska's sinister influence had exerted itself. It was owing to her that my mother had not been united to the one man she loved, to whom she was privately engaged, and who cared for her more than he did for any other woman, in spite of the thoughtless folly which was the cause of her marriage to another man. For it seems that my mother had been induced to marry Sir Harry Davenant in a fit of pique. It was the old, old story. A secret understanding between a romantic young couple who had had stolen meetings in woods and orchards. The young man afraid of confiding, yet awhile, in his father, since, at that time, his elder brother was alive, and he himself only a poor *attaché*. The girl beautiful, sentimental, the

spoilt child of an old general who could have given her but little fortune, for, at that time, *she* also had a brother. There was the usual heartrending parting when the young man went to his foreign post, with mutual vows of eternal constancy. Then, letters, which, by-and-by, upon his part, became rarer and more hurriedly written; and then came the inevitable mischief-maker, with tales of the Polish syren in Paris, in whose toils "poor George Collingwood," who was "always so weak with regard to women!" was said to be so irretrievably trapped and taken. And just then, to complicate matters and plant the germs of future misery, Sir Harry Davenant, a rich, highly-considered country gentleman, with a fine house and deer park, proposes to my mother for the second time, he having been desperately in love with her for more than a year, and she scorning him. Her brother, Everard, had run into debt. Her father was an old man in delicate health. I suppose he must have pressed her not to refuse so advantageous an offer, and so, in an evil hour, the marriage took place.

Perhaps, even then, it might have turned out happily if George Collingwood had never returned from abroad. He seems to have returned just at the wrong moment, too. My mother had been married about three or four years, and must have found herself in some sense "mated with a clown," albeit to one who was altogether devoted to her. Sir Harry Davenant was a most enthusiastic sportsman, and, even at this time, somewhat of a hard drinker. His talk was chiefly about horses and dogs, good or bad "runs," and the defenceless birds, beasts, and fishes that he had destroyed for his own amusement. A woman is apt to tire of such conversation in time, in spite of the sportsman's intrinsic worth and goodness. Then, too, she was at this time childless. The large old house must have seemed very lonely, I should think, without a nursery, upon dark winter days when Sir Harry was out

shooting or hunting, and when my mother was left at home to nurse the dreams and regrets of a wife who realises, when it is too late, that she is married to the wrong husband. From what I can remember of her thoughtful and beautiful face, and from stray books which I have since chanced upon, underlined and annotated by her hand, I fancy that she must have possessed a sensitive and romantic disposition, the very last disposition in the world to combat and withstand the temptation which was destined to beset her when this clever and attractive man, her early love, polished by a residence in foreign cities, popular with men, sought after by women, returned once more to his old haunts, to discover, too late, that she was the one woman in the world for him.

And then, afterwards, what a hell upon earth must have been hers, bound and tied to the rough, honest, country gentleman her husband, who so loved and believed in her.

> "Next him at night and near him all the day,"

(Upon those days, at least, when his favourite pastime did not take him from home,)

> "And longing all those nights and all those days
> For but one glimpse of one sad absent face,"

which, perhaps, may not have been so very "sad" after all!

What torture it must have been to endure his trust, his unquestioning devotion, and to mark his increasing fondness, as the days went on, for the child of which she knew that he was not the father!

And, during a great part of this miserable time, her "own George,"—who was never altogether her own,—separated from her by "leagues of land and sea," was passing his days in the pursuit of pleasure and amuse-

ment, in the company of frivolous, light-hearted people, whose creed, like his own, was, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry—everything else is nothing!" And to think, too, that, after all, if she had only waited, she might have married this man—to love whom was now accounted a sin—and won him from his thoughtless butterfly existence; for his elder brother was now dead, and he was heir to his father's title and estates . . . I hope I do not seem to be excusing these two guilty and unhappy lovers!—"*Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner,*" I merely endeavour to understand in order that I may forgive,—for I feel that I, of all people, should strive to excuse and pardon. Nay, since the existence I owe them has turned from storm to sunshine, I feel disposed to excuse and pardon the sins of the whole world!

* * * * *

I have been married to Courtenay Davenant, now, for nearly ten whole years. They have been years of happiness, of thankfulness, of blessed and unexpected compensation for the years that went before them.

Of what I feel for my husband, of his goodness and devotion, I scarcely dare to write, lest—seeming to count too certainly upon the possession of so great a treasure as his love—it should be lost to me through some sudden stroke of evil fortune. I pray, I hope, that all may be as it is now to the end of our short lives—short, in such circumstances—however long they may be when reckoned by the years.

Whilst Courtenay remained in the army we had no fixed home, but wandered together from place to place, garnering pleasant memories. Wherever he was, however, a home seemed to spring up at once. Then, after he quitted the service, we did not take up our abode at Northover for two years, but lived hard by, at Croft's Farm, a pretty white house, all covered in summer time with roses and purple clematis.

My old friend, Miss Warden, lives there now. She takes care of some little orphan children, for whom we have founded a home, but still dreams, I believe, in spite of the advancing years, when she has time to dream at all, of the rich and handsome husband who has never yet made his appearance, although he was so plainly foretold by the cards.

We are established at Northover now, and it is astonishing how soon the old, sad, memories have been replaced and elbowed out, as it were, by newer and brighter ones. We have two fine noisy boys, who make the old house merry with their laughter, and a little Helen, hardly able to stand yet, upstairs in the well-known nursery, where the progressive heights of that other Helen, who came before her,—beginning at a yard or so from the carpet,—may be still seen scored up on the door.

All these children have their father's eyes. They bear no likeness whatever to their little brother who is sleeping, so far away, in that remote Alpine valley. For this I cannot help feeling grateful. I would that all the painful recollections of the past could lie buried away as peacefully as that little child, but with the coming of new years they too will, perhaps, slumber!

Lord Silchester still lives principally abroad. Tom Collingwood, his nephew and heir, once a brother officer of Courtenay's, and who is married now to a charming wife, keeps house for his uncle whenever he pays a flying visit to the family-place.

"Blood is stronger than water." I correspond with my godfather from time to time, as he wished that there should be no break for him in the thread of my life's story.

He tells me that he arranged this marriage with Courtenay for me, in his own mind, very soon after I was born. If he should fall ill, or desire for any reason to

see me at once, my husband has promised to take me out to him wherever he may be.

There is a pretty white marble tomb now where there was once but a nameless grave in Northover churchyard, round which the blossoms of all the changing seasons shed their fragrance. It is erected "by Courtenay and Helen Davenant," and after the inscription upon it there is a text about the goodness and mercy of God, and the hope we have of Eternal Life. I should have wished that something else might have been engraved upon it also:

"Judge not, that ye be not judged,"

or the text which says that only those who are without sin themselves should throw the first stone at an erring sister—only that this would seem like taking the whole neighbourhood into our confidence.

THE END.

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